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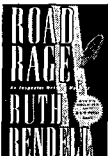


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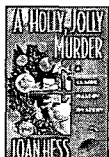
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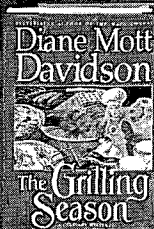


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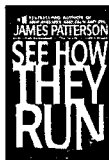
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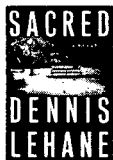
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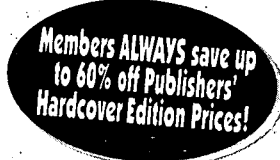
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Joel Kostman

NOTE: In our December issue we introduced Joel Kostman, a New York locksmith who has put some of his adventures on paper. That episode was called "The Naked City," and it as well as the one that follows are included in Mr. Kostman's book Keys to the City: Tales of a New York City Locksmith, published by DK Ink in October. This city, it turns out, is more bizarre—perhaps more of a bazaar—even than we thought. Enjoy!—ED.

CHICKENS, LOBSTERS, BUICKS

I am looking for Richard Nixon.

I'm on East 67th Street right off Central Park waiting for a Miss Herrera to come out of her building. The man who answered the door said she'd be out in a minute, but it's already been five. I heard on the news

today that Nixon just bought a townhouse around here somewhere, so I start looking for him.

It's a nice early spring night. Leaves are coming out on the trees. I walk up the three-step rise to the sidewalk and check out the architecture. Four story buildings with small outdoor porches, french windows, iron gates with flower designs. A few feet away at the curb next to a neatly stacked pile of black garbage bags is a small wooden bookshelf. It is painted a deep shade of red and is in perfect condition. You can often find interesting things on blocks like this. Usable lamps, small appliances, sometimes a chair.

A car pulls up and parks across the street. Three older men in suits get out. They are laughing and acting drunk. They backslap each other, and one of them says loudly and incredulously, "She said what?" I step toward the street to get a

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better look. Maybe one of them is a former president.

"Mr. Locksmith?" a woman's voice calls.

I turn. A young woman with long black hair that hangs loosely down to her shoulders is standing a few feet away. She is wearing a white blouse, a black jacket, and a short red skirt. Her earrings are little gold apples. Her lipstick matches her skirt.

"The car is over there," she says, pointing toward Madison. She walks over to me. Even though she's wearing high heels, her eyes come up only to my chin. I am struck by how dark they are.

"Do you need me to be with you?" she asks.

I try to place her accent.

"Yes," I say. "I need that."

We cross the street and walk together to her car. Two of the three laughing men are standing on the sidewalk smoking cigarettes. They cast glances at Miss Herrera.

"This is it," she says.

I am surprised to discover that it is a Buick. I had expected an Audi or a BMW.

"Will this be difficult?" she asks as she opens the car door.

"Depends on what the problem is," I say.

"This won't go in," she holds up a round key that I assume is for her Chapman cut-off

lock. I take the key and examine it. She hugs herself and says, "I'm a little cold. That is why I ask."

"I think this will be quick. If you don't mind waiting," I say. I get in the car and look at the Chapman lock. "No problem," I say. "It should only take a minute." I file off the small tab at the tip of the key. Then I insert it into the lock and realign it.

"There," I say. "That does it."

"Really? That is it?"

She steps up to the car and looks in. She is still holding her arms. She squats down in the door opening and peers in at the lock. Her hair brushes my face.

"Mila said to call a professional," she says and smiles at me.

"Yes," I say. "It's always a good idea."

"Here. Can you start the car for me? Just to make sure?" She hands me the keys.

"Sure," I say.

I start up the car.

"Oh, how wonderful. And this will not happen again? It will be good?"

"Just make a new key, and then throw this one away," I say. "You shouldn't have any trouble."

"Thank you. Thank you very much. Now I have to go back to the house to get my money," she says. "Please come."

I have decided on Argentin-

ian. Maybe eighteen years old, no more than twenty. Maybe she works in the embassy, or she's an exchange student. In any event, she has that wide-eyed, fragile look of a foreigner caught in New York City's headlights.

We walk back to her house. The suited men are gone. As we approach her building, a young man wearing a black leather jacket and bluejeans passes us.

"*Buenas noches*," he says, nodding slightly at Miss Herrera as he goes by.

I look over at her. She nods at him but does not reply.

"Would you wait outside here, if you don't mind, while I get the money, please?" she asks.

"I'll go put my tools in the car," I say.

"Good," she says. "I'll be right back."

Ten minutes later, when she hasn't appeared, I look in the first floor windows of her building, but the shades are drawn. I rap several times on the large brass door knocker. The sound echoes in the evening air. The same man I encountered earlier opens the door.

"Excuse me," I say, "but I'm waiting for Miss Herrera. She said she was going to get some money to pay me."

He looks at me blankly. Finally he says, "So?"

"Well, she said she was going to be right out, but I've been waiting over ten minutes."

"I didn't see her," he says. "Maybe she's inside, but I didn't see her come in."

"I know she's inside. I mean, I saw her go in," I say.

"Well, you wanna come in and wait? You can wait inside if you want."

I step into a marble-floored vestibule. Straight ahead of me is a carpeted staircase, to my right a half-open door. The man motions for me to go through the door. I walk into a room about twenty by fifteen feet. There is a kitchenette to my right. A fat woman sits at a round Formica-topped table smoking a cigarette and writing on a yellow legal pad. Her hair is pulled back and tied with a scarf. Behind her there is a fireplace. In its interior is a rotating disc with a lightbulb behind it reflecting four different shades of red. In the far corner stands a five foot tall cream-colored ceramic Virgin Mary, her head slightly tilted. She is draped in cloth. A sectional sofa runs along the length of the wall to my left. It is flanked by a pair of three foot tall purple vases filled with fake flowers. The carpet is beige shag. The entire back wall is mirrored.

"Did Elizabeth come in?" the man asks.

The woman points toward the mirrored wall.

"This guy says she was going to get some money to pay him."

"For what?" she looks up at me.

"I'm the locksmith," I say.

"What'd she need a locksmith for?"

"Her car lock was broken. I fixed it."

She snorts. "Well, then she'll probably be out in a minute. She's probably doing something. Why don't you have a seat." She nods her head toward the sofa.

"Yeah. You can watch some TV," the man says. He sits down on the end of the sofa and picks up a remote. He flicks on the TV and starts changing channels. He cranks the volume up very loud and then lights a cigarette. The woman punches numbers on a calculator and continues writing.

I sit down on the sofa and stare at the television, which is just beside the Virgin Mary's right hand. That's when I notice that there appears to be a door hidden in the glass wall. I turn to the man sitting next to me.

"Do you think you could possibly get Miss Herrera for me? I've got another job waiting," I say.

He points the remote at the TV and mutters, "Seen this one."

The woman looks up from her pad. "Don't worry," she says. "She'll be back. She's just busy for a minute."

Then she picks up the telephone and makes a call.

"Yeah, it's Mila. Yeah, I got your message. . . . No, I'm not ignoring you. . . . So what do you want? You think I'm a mind reader? You want chickens? Of course I've got chickens. . . . But what? How many? . . . What do you think, chickens grow on trees? You can't expect so many chickens without a wait. . . . They're coming, they're coming. . . . Oil is expensive. No! What world do you live in? You think you're going to get oil cheap today? Chickens I can do something for you but oil . . . Of course, my friend. Of course. Of course. Now what if . . . what? Lobsters? Lobsters I won't have until next month. NEXT MONTH. What are you deaf? Chickens and lobsters are two different things. . . . Because chickens are easier to come by. Lobsters are a different story. Listen. Be patient. Please. You have to be patient, my friend."

Mila is suddenly silent while she listens to the voice on the other end. Throughout her speech the man next to me hops from one program to another,

resting on one for no more than ten or fifteen seconds.

"Look," Mila says, "chickens are seventy-five. Where do you think you are going to get such a price? Lobsters are . . ." she stands and hits buttons on the calculator. "What are you talking so much for? Listen to me a minute. How many lobsters do you want? . . . Oh, so now it's oil again. I'll tell you what. I'll give you the chickens for sixty-eight, if you take the lobsters next month. . . . Yes, I'll make it a big shipment for you. Will that make you happy? Of course. I want to make you happy."

On the TV some crook blows away a cop. I stare into the fireplace. Every complete cycle, a tiny piece of red light falls on the Virgin Mary's face.

"Excuse me. I hate to bother you again, but I really have to get going. Is there anything you can do to see if she is back there?"

The man looks at me. He is now apparently annoyed. He turns back to the TV. He has decided on the cop show.

"Can't help you, guy," he says.

Mila slams down the phone.

"Idiot!" she screams. "Why do I have to deal with such idiots?"

I walk over to her. The yellow legal pad is covered with numbers.

"Mila? Do you think you can get Miss Herrera for me?" I ask.

Mila glares at me.

"Why don't you sit down, my friend," she says. She motions to the chair across from her and moves the things on the table onto the floor beside her feet. "While we're waiting, let's talk."

"Look," I say, "she only owes me fifty bucks."

"Please," she says. "Sit."

I sit.

"Now. Why don't you tell me about yourself," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Talk to me. Do you like your work? Are you married? Do you have children?"

"I don't think . . ."

"Don't be embarrassed," Mila says. She laughs. "Men are always so embarrassed to talk. You might not believe this because you look like an intelligent young man, but men almost always—" She holds her fingers up to her mouth and zippers it closed. Then she reaches over and pats my arm. "Come on. Tell me a little bit about yourself. I'm sure she'll be out in a minute."

I look at the door in the glass wall. There is no doorknob, only a tiny, semicircular wedge carved out of the glass for a finger hold. From my place at the table, I can hardly tell it's there. "Well," I say, "I like my job. Especially when I get paid."

"Good. That wasn't so hard,

was it?" she says, ignoring my sarcasm. "Do you ever wonder why it is sometimes so hard to say even the little things? Perhaps there are other things, things under the surface, things that aren't so good, things that make it hard for you to talk. Let me see your hand. Some people think I can read the future. Here." She reaches across the table and takes my wrist. She pulls my hand toward her. With her finger she traces the lines.

"I see that you not only like your job but that you will always like it. That you will do well in it."

"That's good," I say.

"But I see other things. Things that are not such happy things."

She folds my fingers up and slides my hand back.

"Like what?" I ask.

"It is better not," she says. "I certainly do not claim to see everything, but I often see things clearly, things that others cannot see. Sometimes these things are not pleasant."

"What? What do you see?"

She looks again at the palm of my hand and sighs.

"Love," she says. "There are many problems with love. Problems that will take years to make better. You have hardships in store for you, my friend. And here. Look." She shows me

the course of a long line running diagonally across it. "Here where it splits. This means you also have a health problem to worry about." She releases my wrist and pushes my arm back across the table.

"I am going to do something for you," she says. "I know it is not necessary, but I want to because you seem like a nice, intelligent young man who understands that life is not always what it appears to be. Am I right, my friend, that you can see that clearly?" Without waiting for an answer, she reaches down and pulls a small packet out of the bag at her feet. "I am going to give you these herbs. You must keep them with you always. And tonight I will light a candle for you. I will light the candle and say prayers. And then every night for the next week I will light another candle for you. This is very special."

"Thank you," I say.

"You're welcome. Good luck to you, my friend."

Mila stands up. I stand up. It occurs to me that I am now being asked to leave.

"That's very kind of you, Mila. The candles. And the herbs. I was wondering, would it also be possible for you to pay me the fifty dollars Miss Herrera owes me and then she can pay you back?"

The man on the sofa gets up and walks over to the kitchen table. Mila holds out her hand. Then she reaches down and retrieves her calculator.

"Let's see," she says. "Each candle is nine dollars. The herbs I will throw in for free. You seem like such a nice young man. That's seven candles at nine. Sixty-three. I'll tell you what. I'll cover the fifty for the girl and I'll just forget about the difference. We'll call it even."

The man walks over to the front door and opens it. He stands there like a butler waiting for me.

Mila smiles and says, "I think now you should get out of here."

"You know, Mila," I say, "I think Richard Nixon's going to fit very well in this neighborhood."

As I walk out the door, she yells after me, "You know you got a deal, you jerk. The herbs are worth a hell of a lot more than the candles."

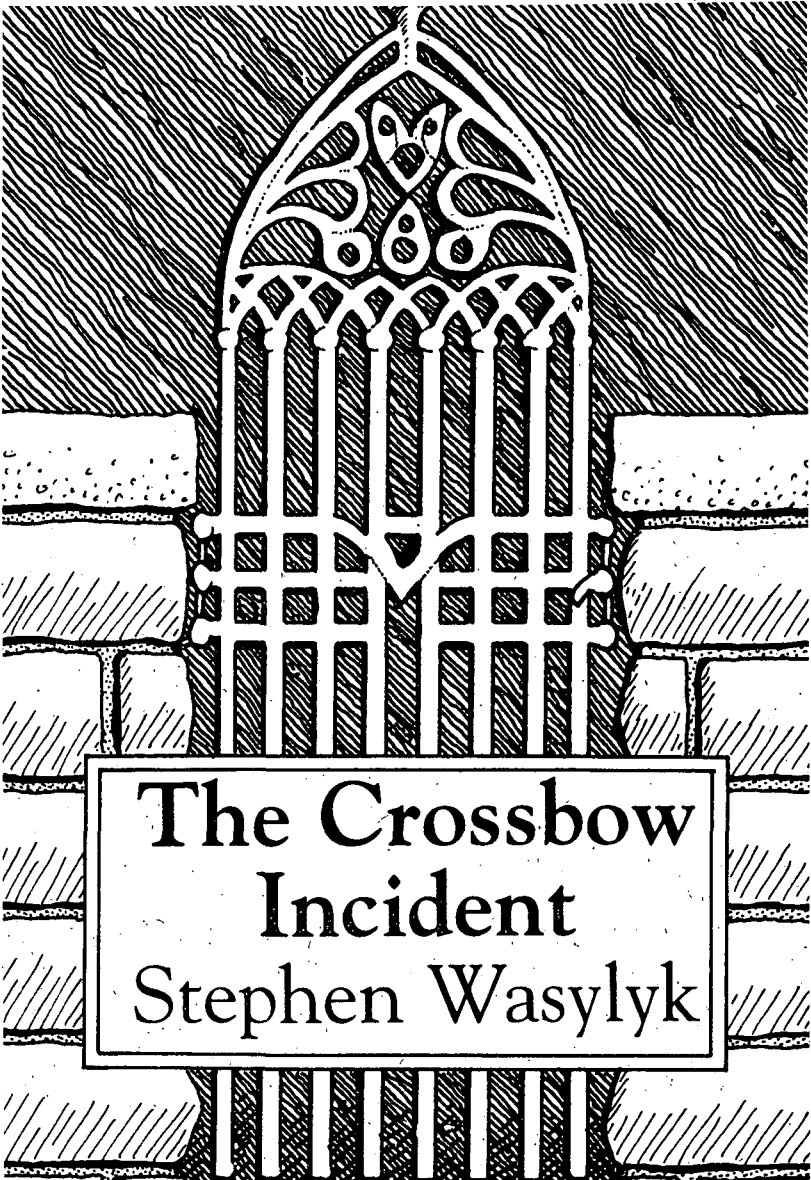
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FICTION



The Crossbow Incident

Stephen Wasylyk

Illustration by Laurie Davis

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/98

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Spocker placed the photo on Hoke Beckett's desk, pulled up a chair, and lowered himself into it wearily.

The print showed a blue fiberglass shaft, white plastic feathers on one end, shiny sharp metal tip on the other. Eight inches long, according to the ruler below it.

"This arrow killed the university professor?"

"Not an arrow, says our expert in everything, Nicholson. Shaft too-thick for the length. More like a crossbow bolt—"

"A what?"

Spocker's eyes were shadowed, well-cut gray suit slightly rumpled, his usual eagerness dulled. He'd not only inherited the position of captain of detectives when Beckett became chief, but also his tendency to consider every murder in the county as a personal affront.

"The correct term for a crossbow arrow, Hoke."

Gina Dalmaccio walked in. Probably just as tired, but on her it didn't show. Very businesslike in a white turtleneck and blue jacket and slacks, as befitting her new rank of lieutenant. Hadn't been able to resist the touch of gold earrings dangling below the short brown hair, though.

In a field where coarse language and everyday brutality

were the norm, she'd always managed to preserve her femininity. No resentment about her promotion. Any man not smart enough to know she deserved it wouldn't have been on Beckett's squad in the first place.

Spocker sagged lower in his chair. "You probably know this but the power of the bow is limited by the strength of the bowman, so some genius came up with the crossbow. Mount the bow on a stock, hold it down with your foot and use both hands to cock it, and you had a weapon strong enough to penetrate armor. But even that has its limitations. There has to be a relationship between the length of the bow and the length of the arrow—"

"What he's getting at is that if that small bolt came off a crossbow, it was a miniaturized version," said Gina.

"Does one exist?"

"Only as a non-lethal toy, according to Nicholson," said Spocker. "That thing had been driven into Dr. Norwood's heart half its length. A crossbow that would bend only eight inches would have to be rather short to generate that much kick, and the force to cock it would require a mechanical device."

"If someone can think of it, someone can build it, and it wouldn't take a skilled craftsman to make a mini-model

crossbow," said Beckett. "But why couldn't the man have been stabbed with the bolt? Why are you two hung up on a crossbow as the weapon?"

"Seems appropriate," said Gina. "Norwood's doctorate was in medieval history."

"Then start with the obvious suspects."

"Obvious suspects?"

"His students. Ever sit through medieval history?"

They'd come in expecting guidance and help as usual, but he'd denied them because after this week they'd have to do without it anyway.

A man murdered by a working model of a crossbow seemed to be an appropriate end for his career in Meridian County. Thirty years before, the ink not yet dry on his degree, he'd been wheeling a patrol unit out of the parking area behind City Hall. Now he was going out as chief, a job he hadn't wanted until several people he respected pointed out that only an idiot wouldn't take advantage of the substantially higher pension and if he didn't move up the deserving people below him couldn't.

The criminal climate had changed a great deal since he'd started. Stricter rules for the police, a more lenient judiciary, and while the perpetrators hadn't become more sophisticated,

the weapons had. But—a model crossbow? What next? A knight in armor holding up a fast food franchise or convenience store?

His lips quirked. He really couldn't walk away from this one.

He was entitled to a gold-braided cap, a gold badge, and a car and driver. The first he avoided by wearing civilian clothes, hid the second, and drove himself.

Gerson, the sergeant on duty at the desk on the ground floor, nodded respectfully as he passed, then shook his head at his back. The only chief he could remember who insisted on looking like someone who'd wandered into the station by mistake. Typically Beckett, he thought. This place would be dull without him.

Beckett parked a few feet from the yellow tape that still indicated the crime scene, left the car, and leaned against a front fender, arms folded.

The tree-studded, curved walkways of the university campus were to his left, essentially deserted because it was spring break. It was separated from the nonscholastic world by a head-high wrought-iron fence that served no useful purpose, since it couldn't keep the stu-



dents in or the general population out. It obviously wasn't intended to do either, one of the walks ending at a wide opening that provided access to the street.

A gaunt, elderly man in paint-spattered white coveralls was fighting rust and corrosion with a paintpot and brush. Probably on the payroll as permanent fence painter, thought Beckett. Take so long to work his way around, it would be time to start again.

Beyond the pale green of the budding trees, the bell tower of the original college building thrust upward toward a cloudless sky, the newer additions lower and hidden.

To Beckett's right was a wall of stately three story brown-stones, each fronted by a chest-high flight of stone steps, a columned portico, and a massive oak door. Faculty residences.

In the early spring dusk Dr. Norwood had left the campus through the opening in the fence and crossed the street, no doubt following the same route for years. He died three doors away from the house he'd occupied alone since his wife had left him some years before, after stating that twenty years among academics was all a sane person could tolerate. Beckett regretted her departure because she surely

would have headed the list of suspects.

The spot selected and the method made no sense to him. Logic said the murderer should have ambushed Norwood in the gloom under the trees at the edge of the campus and made the killing look like a mugging, complicating the work of the police. While the county streets and roads had yet to achieve the hazardous state of those in the city, a mugging death was not unheard of. Instead, the killer had opted for a broad sidewalk in front of houses where anyone could have witnessed the act, with a weapon that immediately eliminated everyone not connected to the victim in some way.

He turned as a car pulled up behind his and Gina stepped out, smiling.

Across the street the elderly man looked at her and lost interest in the fence. Some women had that effect on men of all ages.

"Brushed us off in the office but couldn't keep away, could you? Well, let me tell you, chief, this is my case and I won't tolerate any interference from the brass."

He held up a thumb and forefinger a quarter-inch apart. "Did you ever realize you go through life this far from being suspended for insubordination?"



She flashed a smile at him. "Just following in your footsteps, chief. Exciting way to live, isn't it?"

"Becomes very dull after you spend a few weeks at home with no pay. Why are you here?"

"Want to talk to a couple of faculty members again to clarify a bit of resentment I picked up earlier. These houses are supposed to be allocated only to married faculty, preferably those with children. Dr. Norwood should have been moved out, but I gather he had a lot of clout. Maybe too much. Underneath the usual expressions of shock and sorrow I could feel there wasn't much regret."

"Not well liked?"

"Wouldn't have been voted Most Popular Faculty Member. Davis and Kowarski are interviewing his students, and I wouldn't take bets on his popularity there, either. After telling Kowarski to send the SWAT team after me if I wasn't back in half an hour, I went down to Nicholson's lab in the basement. So far Dr. Weird has nothing from Norwood's clothes or the area, but that bolt—I hate to say this—was homemade. Do you know how irritating it is to work with someone who is always right?"

"If it's any comfort, I've been wrong often enough to fill three

lifetimes. Did Nicholson give you an approximate size for this crossbow, if it exists?"

Her palms framed an area. "About fifteen inches or so wide and long."

"Not easily concealed, and no one would be likely to forget anyone walking down the street carrying something like that. You said you don't want any interference from the brass, but may I make a suggestion?"

A smile tugged at her lips. "I've been hoping you'd make one for years. Since I'm running out of time, I guess I'll have to call on you with an offer you can't refuse."

Their verbal sexual thrust and parry duels had always been kept on a light plane. First, because of his on-and-off relationship with Toni Ewing. Second, because he couldn't imagine that a woman who had probably had males hanging from the trees outside her house since puberty could be serious about a man almost twenty years her senior. And third, and probably most important, he was her supervisor.

"Don't get carried away. You Italian women think all men are easy, but I want you to know that I'm not that kind. Any woman who comes calling had better have a gold ring in her pocket."

Her lips twitched. "Poor man-

ners to laugh at the scene of a murder, chief. I'll get hysterical later."

He waved at the tape. "Look north, east, south, and west, and tell me where that shaft could have come from and killed Norwood before he knew what hit him."

She turned slowly. The old man across the street had squatted with his back to an unpainted part of the fence, his eyes fixed on her with a blank stare, seeing something only he remembered or that perhaps never was.

Facing the houses, she said softly, "I'll be damned."

"We all are, in one way or another," said Beckett. "May I go home and finish packing now?"

He didn't think she even heard him as she inspected a narrow, peaked, wrought-iron gate set into the brownstone wall well outside the yellow tape.

The massive brownstones presented a continuous facade. A narrow alleyway at the rear separated them from the houses on the next street and served for trash and garbage collection, but they'd been built in an era when domestic help was common. Inconvenient and demeaning, to expect the servants and tradespeople to enter the houses that way. So a tunnel had been left between each pair of houses to allow access to the rear for

those not important enough to mount the steps and pass through the oak door.

Norwood could have stepped up on the sidewalk no more than ten feet in front of the one Gina had selected and, in the dusk, could never have seen someone waiting in the deep gloom behind the gate. Neither would anyone else who happened to be in the vicinity.

Gina grasped the gate and shook it gently.

She, Spocker, and Nicholson had been misled both by the short range of the weapon and the absence of any indication that Norwood hadn't been hit only a few feet from where he'd been found. Yet that crossbow bolt in his heart wouldn't have necessarily dropped him where he stood. Like any wounded animal, he would have instinctively staggered toward the safety of his house before collapsing. How far depended on his will and physical condition. His had taken him just far enough from that opening for them to overlook it and assume his assailant had been on the sidewalk or street.

She was on her cell phone, probably calling Nicholson. If anything could be learned from the tunnel, the genius would find it. Beckett was certain of two things. The killer came from one of the houses, and Norwood hadn't died because he'd refused

to vacate the premises. Motives went deeper than that.

He drove off. She didn't notice his departure.

The still-staring old man, who obviously had excellent taste, couldn't have been responsible for the hideous shade of green he was using on the fence. It had probably been donated by a paint-manufacturing alumnus who had been stuck with it and needed a tax writeoff.

Beckett reviewed the stacked cartons. Everything ready for the moving van except for what he'd need in the next two days. Light load. He'd never accumulated anything but necessities.

The retirement dinner was Friday night. No possible way it could be avoided.

"Everyone will be there," said Spocker.

Not everyone.

The one person who should have been—well, Toni Ewing was somewhere in Spain. When the diva she'd taken care of for so long had died, she'd left her not inconsiderable fortune to Toni, along with a note for Beckett:

Retire from that damned job and marry the woman. She'll have enough money for both of you.

That was what the diva had

always wanted and she'd never understood why it hadn't happened, but you couldn't expect a sophisticated woman like Toni, whose life had always revolved around music, to become a Meridian County housewife.

Any more than you could expect Beckett, probably as unsophisticated as they came, to become a tennis-playing bon vivant. They'd both known it would never work. No matter how they felt about each other. So they'd wrapped themselves in the good memories, closed the door on what would remain an empty room in their lives, and gone on.

Time to get back to work.

As he reached his car, he heard his name called.

Michelle, his chestnut-haired neighbor; housewife, mother, and one-time nurse, her hand clutched by blonde soon-to-be-five Amy.

"You're really going, Hoke?"

"The movers will be here Friday. I make settlement Saturday, and I'm gone." He smiled down at Amy. "You'll have someone to play with. A little girl your age. You can invite her to your birthday party next week."

The lower lip trembled. "Don't go, Hoke."

"She'll really miss you, Hoke. Ever since—"

The previous fall, teased un-



mercifully by her three older brothers, Amy had stridden off down the road to find a home where she'd be appreciated and had promptly become lost in the sparsely settled area. During the frantic search Hoke realized that the little blonde elf next door had become as precious to him as the daughter he'd never had, and he'd never forget the fierceness with which that small body had clung to him after he'd found her in the thickening gloom, huddled beneath a tree, tears streaking the dirty face.

"With Don on the road so much, she feels more secure with you next door. She considers you her own personal policeman. Sure you can't make the party?"

He shook his head. "I have a gift for her that may help. I'll bring it over before I go."

He'd ordered a teddy bear dressed in a policeman's uniform and cap, a disc around its neck reading HOKE.

"Going to that cabin you have on the lake upstate? What in the world are you going to do up there? Turn into one of these retired types who fish all day?"

"Not likely. The county sheriff and I have become good friends. He threatens to keep me busy. But I'll be back to visit. Too many strong ties here to break easily, like the little blonde one holding your hand."

His radio squawked as he drove off. He listened, picked up his cell phone, and dialed Spocker.

"We may have a problem, Hoke. We can't raise Gina. She wanted Nicholson to look at something at the scene, but when he got here, she was gone. Her car is here, so she must be in the vicinity, but she doesn't answer her beeper or phone."

"I'll meet you there."

There was a patrol unit with Spocker. Nicholson—tall, bony, bearded, and spectacled—was pacing, looking very woeful and worried. Along with Bach played as loudly as possible on the expensive sound system in his laboratory, he harbored an unrequited passion for Gina. Difficult to say which was uppermost in his heart, but Beckett would bet on Bach.

"I should have gotten here sooner," he said.

"She was supposed to wait," said Beckett. He didn't say she often ignored things she was supposed to do.

Evidently returning from a break, the elderly fence painter appeared on the walk leading to the campus, paintbucket in hand.

"She said she was going to reinterview some of the people in the houses," said Spocker, "but she must have found some-



thing or she wouldn't have called Nicholson."

"She did." Beckett pointed at the locked gate. "I happened to be looking the scene over when she arrived. She thought the killer might have hidden in that tunnel between the houses."

"Oh Lord, I missed that," said Nicholson.

"She wanted you with her so she wouldn't trample on something important. Hold on a minute."

He crossed the street to the old man.

"That young woman you were watching earlier. Did you see where she went?"

The man grinned. "Noticed that I couldn't take my eyes off her? Sheer lust, you know. She reminded me of someone I knew when I was capable of more than just the feeling." He waved his brush. "Right after you left, the woman in the house came out and talked to her, and they went up to the murdered guy's place. Didn't come out, so I suppose they're still in there. Woman must have had a key, which didn't surprise me."

"Why not?"

He indicated the fence, which seemed to stretch out to infinity. "I've been painting on this side for a week. Not in that young woman's class but not bad for a woman her age, so I couldn't help but notice her go-

ing up the street a couple of afternoons to that house." He grinned. "I suppose she knew him real well."

Spocker was already dialing his cell phone. "Davis interviewed her. Let's see what he can tell us."

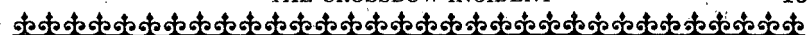
He talked as he and Beckett crossed the street again, then punched the button and slipped the phone into his pocket.

"Her name is Lackland. Her husband is head of the English Department and is away at a seminar. One son, in Florida with some friends on spring break. She knew Norwood only as a member of the faculty and had neither seen nor heard anything. Davis told Gina that she should be reinterviewed. He wondered why she showed no emotion at all over a man she must have known for years who'd been killed almost on her doorstep."

They looked up the street at Norwood's house four doors away.

"The university owns these houses, Hoke. One of the officials gave a key to Kowarski. He gave it to Gina. We'll have to wait for another or break in."

Beckett shook his head. "We can't risk making a lot of noise because we don't know what's going on in there. Can't wait too long, either."



"You think she might be a hostage?"

"Could be one reason she doesn't respond."

Neither wanted to mention another.

They were attracting onlookers, both in the street and in the porticos of the houses. He'd seen a curtain waver in the house that shared the tunnel with the Lacklands.

He was the chief. His job was to delegate and direct, but to hell with that. Telling the uniformed men to remain in front of the Lacklands' but to watch the front door of Norwood's without exhibiting obvious interest, he sprinted up the steps of the house where the curtain had wavered. He might be able to kill two birds with one stone: get a reading on the Lackland woman and access to the rear of Norwood's house. No, three birds. Since she shared the tunnel with her, she had to have a key to that gate.

The door opened before he reached it. The attractive middle-aged woman, wearing fashionable glasses, a pullover, and slacks, her hair tied back, appeared alarmed.

"What's wrong?"

"We'd like permission to go through to your back yard."

"Of course. I'll show you the way."

She led them to the kitchen

and down a flight of stairs to a cluttered basement, which was really the ground floor.

"Sorry for the mess," she apologized, "but with the children grown and gone, we have no use for the space down here. Some people do, though."

Beckett sensed something behind the words.

"How about Dr. Norwood?"

"Well, no ordinary rainy-day rec room for him, unless you want to play in a replica of a medieval torture chamber. Imagine. He always said he'd like to get the university president into it. Frankly, I considered the man a bit weird. Have you found out who killed him yet?"

Beckett looked at Spocker.

"Kowarski made a note of the basement when he searched the house," said Spocker. "One of the things Gina was going to follow up."

"The woman next door, Mrs. Lackland," said Beckett casually. "Good friend?"

"Regretfully, no. I tried, but she was a bit too tied up with her husband's career. No life of her own, if you know what I mean. Not for me. You can turn around one day and find you're very lonely."

She turned the key of a dead-bolt lock on a wooden door.

"Would Dr. Norwood's door be the same type?" asked Beckett.



"I imagine so, unless he replaced it."

Beckett glanced around. "Do you have any tools? A hammer, screwdriver, chisel?"

Her eyes widened. "Good Lord, don't tell me you're going to break in. Aren't you supposed to have a search warrant or something?"

"Not when a life is at risk," said Spocker.

One hand flew to her throat, the other pointed, while her voice was suddenly tremulous. "What tools we have are in that box. My husband is no handyman."

Armed with a hammer and large screwdriver, they emerged into the small back yard.

"Exactly where did Dr. Norwood build that torture chamber in his basement?" Beckett asked.

She was more shaken now. "In a room at the front. There's a wall and a door, but what—"

"Thank you for your help," said Beckett. "One thing more. Please give Mr. Nicholson the key to that gate in the tunnel. Then go back in and stay there."

She stepped inside the basement, came back with a small key on a large ring, handed it to Nicholson, and ran into the house.

"Check out the tunnel, then get the lock off," Beckett told

Nicholson. "Makes the route a lot shorter if Spocker and I need help in a hurry."

Nicholson disappeared into the passageway while they proceeded up the alley.

The houses had no identification. Beckett wished someone had been thoughtful enough to paint street numbers on the wood fences that closed off the back yards. He counted off four, pushed through, and hoped they were right; otherwise the county was in for a big lawsuit.

"Before we do this," he said, "get Norwood's number from the operator and try it. If we have a hostage situation, we may be able to negotiate."

Spocker dialed. No answer to the almost immediate ringing inside. At least they had the right house.

Rejecting the hammer as too noisy, Beckett used the screwdriver to chew through the thin panel opposite the lock and splinter away the old dried wood until he had a ragged hole large enough for his hand. He reached through. The key had been left in the lock.

They stepped into an area the width of the house and about twenty feet deep, lighted by a naked bulb in a ceiling fixture. The stairs from the kitchen above ended perhaps five feet from the back wall. Other than

the electrical service box, the area was bare.

In front of them was a wall with a door in the center.

"Hoke," Spocker whispered. He pointed at a strip of yellow light under the door, his finger tracing streaks on the dusty cement floor that led up to it.

Beckett knelt, fingered one of several dark smears. Red. Fresh blood.

Face grim, Spocker cursed softly. He held his Glock with both hands and jerked his head at the door, a question in his eyes.

Beckett held up a hand and put an ear to the door. The murmur of a high-pitched female voice rose and fell.

He retreated and whispered into Spocker's ear.

"Any windows in there are probably covered. She'll have to come out if I kill the lights."

He turned off the electricity at the box. The ceiling light went out. So did the strip of light under the door.

He and Spocker pressed their backs to the wall on either side of it.

She was there suddenly as the door opened on silent hinges, a medium-sized, middle-aged woman with graying hair cut short, dressed in a loose white blouse and dark slacks; indistinguishable from many encountered in supermarkets.

Except that this one advanced slowly and warily, leaning slightly forward as though weighted down by the long, heavy iron tongs she carried in one hand.

She stared at the open back door for a moment before its significance penetrated. With a shriek she spun toward Beckett, the tongs slashing backhanded at his head. He caught a glimpse of madness in her eyes, side-lighted by the light from the open door, before the tongs smacked into his right palm, pain rocketing up his arm as a bone cracked.

Spocker wrapped his arms around her, and as she kicked and screamed imprecations no one would ever expect from the wife of the head of the English Department, Beckett turned the electricity on again and dashed into the room.

Arms wide and held there with wrist clamps, ankles also manacled to the wall, blood trickling down one side of a face distorted with pain, Gina lifted her head and tried to smile as she whispered, "What took so long?"

Beckett released her ankles and, supporting her with one arm, snapped the right wrist clamp open with his good hand. When he released the other, she screamed and fainted. Only then did he notice that the long-

sleeved jacket had concealed the odd looseness of her left arm.

One-handed, he removed his belt, passed it around her slim body to immobilize the arm, and carried her upstairs and through the house because it was impossible to carry her through the tunnel, Spocker leading the way with the now hysterically weeping and handcuffed Lackland woman.

He carefully slid her into the front seat of his car.

Nicholson took one look at his right hand and the swelling already taking place and said, "I'll drive, Hoke."

Not until assured she was fully repairable—her left shoulder had been dislocated and the clavicle broken, the blood was from a deep cut in her scalp, and she probably had a concussion—did he allow them to look at his hand.

The young doctor waved the X-ray almost gleefully. "You'll celebrate your retirement with your hand in a cast, chief."

Staring at the floor, feeling as though there was something in all of this that he'd missed, Beckett grunted. "Make it small enough to go through the sleeve of a tuxedo jacket or you'll be in a cell."

A familiar pair of shoes entered his range of vision.

"Nicholson found the crossbow, plastic-bagged and shoved into a trash barrel in her back yard," said Spocker. "I suppose her prints are all over it, as if we'd need them after this."

"You never know. We'll get Gina's . . ."

The moment he mentioned her name he knew what he'd missed.

" . . . story in the morning."

He sat there, numbed.

Carrying her from that house and rushing her to the hospital had been what he'd have done for any of his people. He closed his eyes. No. Far more to it than that; his concern had verged on fear and panic. To put it simply, she'd become as precious to him as little Amy—his feelings sublimated through necessity and denied through stupidity. Now all he could do was file them away among life's errors because he was leaving while life remained here, where it should be. He couldn't ask her to choose between going and staying.

Damn that smirking little cherub. He hadn't needed a crossbow. He'd zapped him with an ordinary arrow a long time ago.

He groaned.

The doctor had a great bedside manner. "Now, chief, we can't have a cure without a little pain," he said sternly.



Half sitting up in bed, face scrubbed, shiny, and cosmeticless beneath the bandage that circled her head, she could have been a model posing for an ad for the hospital—"bring your trauma and health insurance to our experts."

Her arm was strapped into immobility, which didn't prevent pain from flicking across her face when she shifted.

Along with Beckett, Spocker was there, and a young assistant D.A. named Constantine.

Constantine placed a tape recorder on the bed.

"Just hit the high spots. All we need now is enough to get this off the ground."

She winced as she took a deep breath. "I was waiting for Nicholson when she came out. She said that if I wanted to know why Norwood had been killed, she had something to show me. At his house I didn't ask why she had a key. There could have been a legitimate reason, and I could always ask later after I saw what she had in mind. She seemed perfectly normal, so I wasn't expecting anything irrational. When she reached the bottom of those basement steps, I had three or four to go. She reached around and grabbed my ankle. I went the rest of the way head first. I took the cellar wall with my shoulder, which didn't

keep my head from hitting it hard enough to knock me out. The doctors say the major damage to my shoulder came when she dragged me into that room and hung me up."

"How did she manage that by herself?"

"Pulley arrangement," Spocker said. "Kept the torturer payroll down. One man does all."

"When I came to, I was hanging there trying to decide which hurt worse, my shoulder or my head."

"What in the hell did she have in mind?" asked Beckett.

"She wanted information. Who did we suspect? What did I expect to find in the tunnel alongside her house? She kept waving those tongs and saying that if I didn't tell her what she wanted to know, she'd start pinching various tender parts of my anatomy. I felt that she wouldn't really hurt me but I'd better change the subject. I asked her what she'd intended to show me when she brought me there. That touched a nerve. She froze. When she started talking again, she was a different woman."

"Different how?" asked Constantine.

"Cold angry. Talking to herself rather than to me. I was passing out now and then, but I caught enough. She'd become involved in an affair with Nor-



wood. The man was a sexual sadist cum laude. Gradually, he led her—you know how those things go. Got her down in that basement and did the usual unspeakable things.”

“Place was certainly equipped for it,” said Spocker.

“When she wanted to end it, he laughed and told her, she couldn’t, or even tell anyone, because she had more to lose than he did: What would her distinguished husband say? Or her son? She’d do what he said or else. So she decided to kill him.”

A never-ending story, thought Beckett. Only the names of the characters change.

“Her problem was she didn’t know how. She had no gun, had no idea how to get one, and if she tried to whack him with one of those battle-axes or swords he had down there, he’d just take it away from her. Then she remembered the model crossbow he’d made several years ago for some sort of classroom project. He’d showed her how to cock it with a special lever, how to aim and fire. She took it while he was at the university, waited in the tunnel, and called to him when he stepped up on the curb. He started toward her. Couldn’t see her behind the gate holding the crossbow, of course. He’d told her it was deadly up to six feet.”

“Only if it hit a vital spot,”

said Beckett. “Anywhere else he’d have been in intensive care, cursing her.”

“When she saw him die, she realized she was no better off than before. We’d find her, and what she’d been hiding from her husband and son would come out anyway. That’s when she lost it completely.”

Beckett tapped Constantine. “Enough for now.”

Spocker left with him.

Gina closed her eyes. “Whatever that creep did to her body doesn’t compare with what he did to her mind.”

Locked in a torture chamber of his own, Beckett could only nod.

“You know why I’m so angry with myself for being stupid? They have to operate to repair the shoulder. That means scars. Goodbye, sleeveless everything.”

“Not necessarily.”

“What do *you* know? Bad enough I’ll have an arm that looks as though it’s been sewn on, but I’ll also miss your retirement dinner.”

Her eyes opened, the familiar dancing, teasing light there in spite of the pain.

“Eat your heart out. I bought a dinner dress about the size of one of your handkerchiefs, with spaghetti-thin shoulder straps. You would have forgotten your speech.”

He grinned. “The audience


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would have been grateful for both. Now get some rest. I'll be back to say goodbye."

She gave him a Mona Lisa smile. "Careful. Since you'll no longer be my boss, I may take liberties."

"I'm sure I can handle a one-armed woman."

"You've never run into an Italian one," she said.

The dinner was no different from all other retirement dinners except that no one could remember another tuxedo-clad honoree with a clublike cast on one hand.

The gifts, well, those had been a problem. As Spocker said, what can you get someone who never wanted anything and could have gone through life living out of a backpack? The pièce de résistance was a certificate for an outboard motor so ad-

vanced it whispered, and reputedly played "The Stars and Stripes Forever" when you landed a big one.

The bonus was a little package Spocker handed him.

"Gina phoned the order in from the hospital and asked me to deliver it for her. I have no idea what it is."

Beckett retreated to a quiet corner and opened it.

His breath caught in his throat for a moment before he grinned. Lead a good, clean life and sometimes you get more than you deserve.

Sergeant Gerson, watching his swift departure cradling an unopened bottle of champagne, told himself that only Beckett would leave his retirement dinner before the festivities were really over.

But then Sergeant Gerson hadn't seen the gold ring.

FICTION

# DISPOSING OF UNCLE ROCCO

Barbara McCarty



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**E**verybody knows the business my family's in, it's no secret. I'm not proud of what we do, but I'm not ashamed either. It's like this, if right from the start a kid knows his family is in banking or retail or construction, whatever, the kid just accepts that's the family business. But that doesn't mean what your family does, you're going to do it, too. You might. But you might not, it's up to you.

Take my cousin Mark. He's a Gambrelli and all of his brothers work for his old man, but Mark runs a plumbing business in Manhattan with no connections. Or take me, I'm not in the business either, I'm at Brooklyn College studying engineering. My case is probably more validation than Mark's that what I'm saying is right, since I'm a Gambrelli and my mom was a Golino, which means I got the family business on both sides.

So now you know who I am. And if you don't, you've probably been out of the country the last ten years because the Gambrellis are famous New York to L.A. More than anything I'd say it was Uncle Joe who put us all over the map, indicted for income tax evasion and racketeering, getting off two times before the Feds and the City of New York finally nailed him. He's doing time upstate, naturally denying he's still running things from his new location just like he ran things from Denny's Deli in Flushing for all the time I can remember. Believe me, Uncle Joe is trying to pull the wool. He's more in charge now than he ever was when he was walking around outside in his four thousand dollar suits, handing down the word through his people at Denny's or calling the shots on his cell phone riding home to Brooklyn in the back of the Town Car, all the cops in New York listening in, none of them knowing what the hell he was talking about.

So when Uncle Rocco Golino walked into Denny's that Saturday afternoon, the first thing Denny did was to put a call in to Uncle Joe. It had to go through channels, I mean even Uncle Joe doesn't have a direct line, so it took a while. During the while, Uncle Rocco sat down in Uncle Joe's booth in the back—always kept empty out of respect—and ordered coffee and sambuca, bring the pot and the bottle. My cousin Adriana was waiting tables, and Rocco wouldn't speak English to her. Adriana's Italian consists of words like ciao and cappuccino, so even though Rocco was talking up a storm, she didn't have the slightest what he wanted aside from the coffee and the sambuca. And since no one wanted to get into it until they heard what to do from Uncle Joe, Rocco just sat in the booth, drinking his

coffee, sipping his sambuca, gabbing on to Adriana, who didn't get a word, while the rest of the place held its breath and waited for the phone to ring.

Here is the problem. When Uncle Joe went upstate, Uncle Mike Golino tried to take over the whole pie, cutting out Uncle Joe and most of the Gambrelli side of the family. This led to a shooting that resulted in two deaths, one from each side, and in addition my second cousin Freddie Gambrelli was left in a wheelchair. The following week some people, theirs, turned up in Flushing Meadows over by the tennis courts, dead in the trunk of a boosted Cadillac Seville. That was followed by a car chase up the Cross Bronx. The cops got into that, and then the mayor made a speech about the rest of it, which brought a whole new dimension to the problem. The result was a brokered division of the family business handled by Uncle Max Golino, who came out of retirement in Florida, with a signed agreement about who went where in the city. The peace held for two years. When Uncle Rocco Golino walked into Denny's, he violated the agreement, and when he sat down in Uncle Joe's booth, he all but declared war. This was so not good it was right next to catastrophic. Nobody knew if Rocco was acting on his own or if the Golinos had sent him. And nobody knew, until Uncle Joe told them what to do, if they should even ask Rocco which it was.

And then Uncle Rocco made things much, much worse. He died.

To clarify how that could happen. When he walked into Denny's that day, Rocco Golino was probably eighty-six, eighty-seven years old. I knew him all my life. He was a legend. Great big man, six two, six three. No fat, but about two ten, two twenty. One time he knocked the front door off the 23rd Precinct police station. Another time he threw a table twenty feet across a restaurant and took out two wiseguys and a waiter. Once he twisted two pieces of rebar around each other just to make his point. Or so they say. In his prime he was a bodyguard; in his old age he just kind of lived on the periphery of the Golino family, sitting in the office of the Golinos' auto parts business during the day, going home to his daughter's place at night. Just like a lot of old men.

But Uncle Rocco would never be just another old man. He was too much of a symbol. So when Uncle Joe finally got the message about Rocco being there, he sent back that Denny was supposed to give him whatever he wanted, find out who sent him, what the deal was, and get back to him ASAP. But by the time Uncle Joe's message got to Denny's, Uncle Rocco had gone to his great reward, whatever it

might turn out to be, and no one in the place could do anything with this new circumstance until Uncle Joe was given the update and could make the necessary adjustment.

Time passed, Uncle Rocco stayed slumped in his booth. No one from the Golinos showed up, no word came down from Uncle Joe. And the crowd at Denny's was beginning to wonder if maybe Rocco was just a lost old man who had followed a groove from way back in his past, showing up at Denny's like he used to when he was my grandfather Piero Golino's bodyguard, taking his seat where he always did when Grandpop was in the office. On the other hand, they couldn't take the chance that that was all there was to it, so Denny's got ready just in case. Adriana and the other women were sent home, the CLOSED sign went up in the window, and several more people came in, all of them carrying.

Finally the word came back from Uncle Joe. "Send for Dr. Paulo. You need to make sure he's really dead. And get Paulo to give you a quick estimate of the cause. If it's just his heart or something, call his daughter. If it's anything else, you gotta get Rocco out of there. If his demise is laid to us, it could stir up the old problem worse than before. Now, if it's something unnatural, I want you to send for Mark and Vincent. Tell them to get Rocco to some neutral ground and dump him, but do it respectfully. Not in garbage, not beside the road. Some dignified place that cannot in any way be tied to us. Mark will understand what I mean. When it's done, tell them to get the word to me."

The general impression of the people hanging on the speaker phone was that Uncle Joe actually sounded very tense about all this, which naturally made everyone at Denny's one hundred percent uptight.

Mark and I arrived at Denny's at about the same time. Mark is my cousin I mentioned who's the plumber in Manhattan. I'm Vincent, the student from Brooklyn. We're about the same age, maybe Mark's a year or two older, twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Dark-haired, like me, and like me he works out. He's looking pretty good, maybe a couple of inches shorter than me, about five ten, five eleven. Generally speaking, women love Mark, and I'll say this, he loves them back.

We had to wait while my uncle, the doctor, checked out Uncle Rocco. "Gunshot wound," Uncle Paulo said after a minute. "Right here." Everybody gathered around looked where Paulo was pointing. Amazingly close to what I thought had to be Rocco's heart was this.

little dark hole in his sweater that no one saw before, since Rocco was wearing a sportcoat over the sweater. He was also, by the way, wearing a white on white shirt and a two hundred dollar tie; Rocco always was a classy dresser. "I would guess he was shot sometime earlier this morning," Paulo said, bending Uncle Rocco forward, pulling up the sportcoat and the sweater. "No exit wound," Paulo said as much to himself as to us, "the man's a moose." He straightened Uncle Rocco's clothes and sat him up again. "He was probably more dead than alive when he walked in here. Even so, I don't know how the hell he did it. Tell Joe that's as much as I can tell him without a thorough examination," Paulo said, backing away from Rocco and putting stuff in his bag. "I'm out of here. I didn't see him, I haven't been here, and I wish you the best of luck." Paulo nodded "so long" to the room and disappeared out Denny's kitchen door.

There was some general shuffling around after that, people coming up to get a look at Rocco dead, after which Mark said to me, "So, Vinnie, looks like we've been appointed. What d'you say we get at it, relieve these good people of the stiff in the booth?"

Two things I didn't like about that. First, I didn't want to get mixed up in this. Second, it seemed disrespectful toward Uncle Rocco to refer to him as "the stiff in the booth." But I didn't register a complaint on either score. What I was about to do undoubtedly wasn't legal, but it would probably prevent a war with casualties on both sides and the cops in the middle, and that would be good. And Mark was going to kid around no matter what I said. Asking him to show Uncle Rocco a little respect would be a waste of time.

"We'll take him in my car," Mark said to me, and then to the people still hanging around Rocco, "When you guys finish scoping out the corpse, how about you give us a hand loading him?"

And that's how I found myself driving around the city of New York with my cousin Mark and my dead Uncle Rocco in Mark's convertible BMW with the top down. I mentioned the idea we should put the top up. "You got to be kidding," Mark said. "Ride around closed up in a car with a dead guy? If I'm going to transport Uncle Rocco, the condition he's in, I'm going to need all the fresh air I can get."

"Yeah but, Mark, what if someone notices . . ." I protested mildly, since there's never much point in arguing with Mark.

"I don't think he looks so dead," Mark said. "He just looks old."

Mark actually had a point. When I glanced back at Rocco propped up in the back seat of the Beemer, the wind ruffling his gray hair,



the spring sun lighting up his face, I had to agree he didn't look much worse dead than he had looked alive the last time I saw him. I told myself what the heck, I might as well enjoy the ride. No point in getting all in an uproar about the top being down, Mark's going to do what Mark's going to do, and besides, Rocco wouldn't be with us that long. We were just going to leave him on a bench in Central Park or something and call it a day, right? Not right.

Our first stop was a dry cleaner's on 34th and Eighth. We were passing by when Mark pulled over and said, "Hey, Vinnie, you mind getting my shirts? Me and Rocco will take a spin around the block, come back and pick you up."

"Let's just get rid of Rocco," I said very definitely. "Then if you want to run a few errands, maybe you'll take me back to Denny's first. I've got things to do myself—"

"Hey, we're right here," Mark said. "What's the big deal?"

So I ran in and got my cousin's cleaning, mainly because I didn't want to run the risk of a scene, draw a crowd. Back in the car I tried reason. "We gotta dump Rocco, Mark. He's not getting any better back there."

"Absolutely, Vinnie, absolutely," Mark said, tooling the Beemer up Sixth Avenue toward the park, "but we want to leave him where there won't be any question one of us Gambrellis did him. That's the whole point of this excursion. Or am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong," I said, "but if we get stopped, and the cops discover Uncle Rocco's present state of health, what conclusion is everyone going to come to?"

"First off," Mark said, "you worry too much. Why would a cop stop us, what are we doing wrong?" I had an answer for that, but I kept my mouth shut, hoping to hear something more encouraging when Mark got to "second," which I did. "Second," he continued, "as you can see we're heading for the park, so just keep your shirt on. Twenty minutes from now Rocco's on a bench on the West Side, and we're on our way back to Denny's. P.O.C."

It was not a piece of cake. We made three passes through the park, twice with Mark driving, once with me driving, and no time did we find a bench or any other place, respectful or otherwise, to dump Uncle Rocco. It was a beautiful spring day in New York City, so naturally the whole town was in the park. No way we could get all six feet two inches plus of Uncle Rocco past all those people, make him look like he was strolling over to sit on a park bench and take a snooze in the sun. We'd be spotted in a New York heartbeat.

I don't know which would be harder to explain it to, the cops or the Golinos.

So when Mark said the park was a bust but he had thought of somewhere else to dump Uncle Rocco, I was right with him. And as it turned out, the new place was good, maybe even better than the park, but it had a downside—to use it we'd have to keep Rocco with us until one, two in the morning.

Filling the time in between was interesting. No one at Denny's wanted to hear from us or see us until we had divested the family of Uncle Rocco, so we were pretty much on our own. I was very nervous about that, but Mark took it in stride. In fact, we went right on with his life. Rocco and I drove out to Queens with him, where he saw his girlfriend Addy and I sat in Addy's garage in the Beemer with Rocco, doing a *Times* crossword puzzle and watching Rocco look leader.

After that we went to a pizza place Mark knows from when he was a kid and ate the pizza over by Shea Stadium, where there wasn't a ballgame going on but I swear to God it wouldn't have bothered Mark if there was. He kept asking Rocco if he wanted a slice. The only concession I got out of Mark was he put the top up on the Beemer.

After that we went to our cousin Freddie's to borrow his wheelchair for Uncle Rocco. After that we got very lucky and found a train with an empty car first try, and Uncle Rocco was gone.

I put the call in to Denny's from a pay phone on our way back, Mark standing next to me, the Beemer with the top down again humming away at the curb. "Where the hell you been?" Denny said, sounding panicked and mad all at the same time.

"Where do you think? Dumping Rocco," I said, sounding mad myself; it had been a long, long day.

"Damn it!" Denny said. "The Golinos have been here. They're looking to have us help them find Rocco, and they figured he might have stumbled in here. Where'd you leave him?"

"The Golinos are asking us for help?" I said, and Mark, hearing my side of the conversation, said what I was thinking: "So they have to know we didn't do him. Which means they know who did do him. Which means they did him."

"So who did Rocco?" I asked Denny.

"His daughter," Denny said. "What have you clowns done with him? It's your Uncle Joe wants to know."

He was sounding very anxious now, but I didn't care. He wasn't

the one who had spent the day riding around with Rocco, I was, so my questions came first. "His daughter!" I said. "Why?"

"Rocco wasn't the best of fathers," Denny said, like that explained it, and maybe it did.

"Yeah," I agreed, "but Aunt Sylvia has to be sixty years old, why'd she wait all this time to pop him?"

Mark said, "Good question, Vinnie."

"She was a patient woman," Denny said, "but I guess her patience finally ran out. Which is what's happening with me. Are you guys gonna tell me what you did with Rocco, or am I gonna do a Cousin Sylvia on the pair a you?"

"He's on the Lexington Avenue subway," I said to Denny. "Going uptown."

"Not bad," Denny said. "I'll inform the Golinos. I think they'll be happy with that. And I'll pass the word to your uncle. Not bad at all," Denny said again.

As it turned out, the Golinos had my Aunt Sylvia covered as to time and place, and the gun, which naturally was unregistered, is where nobody will ever find it anyway. The families gave Sylvia a verdict of justifiable homicide, and if you want my opinion, it probably was. We all went to the funeral, both sides. It was a very major event, the flowers alone could have paid a semester's tuition.

And by the way, it was a Transit Authority cop who found Uncle Rocco—which was fairly perfect, if you think of it—when Rocco and the train finally came to the end of the line.

# PAYDAY

## Martin Limón



**T**he wrinkled sergeant cursed as he held the handkerchief to the knot on his head. Blood seeped through the white linen and trickled down his wrist.

"They were inside the jeep and pounding me before I could pull

my weapon." An army-issue .45 was still holstered and buckled to his canvas web belt. "I don't know why she stopped. Probably just wanted to give them a ride."

My name is George Sueño. Me and my partner, Ernie Bas-

com, are agents for the 8th Army Criminal Investigation Division in Seoul, Korea. We were standing in the big black-top bus parking area next to the two story red brick building that housed 8th Army Finance.

Ernie paced back and forth, watching the bleeding staff sergeant, studying him. "Let me get this straight, Holtbaker. You and this second lieutenant Burcshoff pick up the Aviation Detachment payroll here at Finance, you load the briefcase full of money into the jeep, you start to drive off, and she stops to pick up a couple of guys standing on the curb?"

"They waved us down."

"They jump in the jeep, club you on the head, shove you onto the sidewalk, and then drive off with the jeep and the money and Second Lieutenant Burcshoff."

Holtbaker nodded. Blood puddled in the cuff of his green fatigue shirt.

"Did she put up any sort of a fight?" I asked.

"Yeah. I think she went for that pearl-handled pistol she wore, something passed down from her old man, she told me, a retired colonel. But these guys were ready. She didn't have a chance."

The sergeant described them. One tall and blond, the other average height, brown hair. The blond guy was somewhat

thin. The brown-haired guy was average weight. No distinguishing characteristics. They were both wearing sneakers, bluejeans, and nylon jackets, what every off-duty GI in the country wore.

A typically miserable description from a witness who was anything but a trained observer.

"When they made their getaway," Ernie asked, "who drove? Second Lieutenant Burcshoff or one of the hijackers?"

"How the hell should I know? By then I was facedown on the sidewalk."

"How much money was in that briefcase?"

"The whole monthly payroll for the Aviation Detachment. Over ten thousand bucks."

Ernie and I canvassed the area for witnesses. At the Moyer Recreation Center, no one had seen anything. These thieves were quick and professional. Get in. Get the money and the jeep. Get out. Not your typical GI's pulling some caper on a whim.

"What's our next step?" Ernie asked.

"They have a jeep, they have a satchel full of money, and they have a female second lieutenant. What we do is wait for one of those items to turn up."

Ernie pulled out another stick of ginseng gum, unwrapped it, and popped it into his mouth.

"Hopefully, it will be the second lieutenant."

I nodded in agreement. "And hopefully, she'll be alive."

"Always preferable to dead," Ernie said.

Ernie's wish came true. A half hour later we received a call from the Korean National Police in the city of Kimpo, about fifteen miles west of Seoul. They had Second Lieutenant Burcshoff. She was alive. She was on the phone. Shouting.

"They took everything! The money, the jeep. I can't believe it but the sons of bitches even took my goddamned .45!"

I held the phone away from my ear. She didn't sound frightened, she sounded angry as hell. I told her to remain calm. Ernie and I would be there in a few minutes. We drove to Kimpo.

Second Lieutenant Constance R. Burcshoff held herself as if she were constantly at attention. The Korean cops stared at her surreptitiously, appalled that a woman would be wearing a fatigue uniform and combat boots, but she ignored their amazement.

"The thieves kicked me out of the jeep about two miles from here," she said. "In the middle of a few acres of rice paddies. I caught a tractor into town."

"They didn't try to hide their identity?"

"They made me lie facedown in the back of the jeep. Still, I caught a glimpse of both of them."

The description she gave us didn't match what Sergeant Holtbaker had told us. This time the blond guy wasn't as tall and not quite so thin. The brown-haired guy seemed a little chubbier in her description. None of it gave us much to go on.

We drove Lieutenant Burcshoff back to Seoul. She sat ramrod stiff in the back seat of the jeep, staring straight ahead, occasionally touching the empty holster at her hip.

Ernie offered her a stick of ginseng gum. She refused. I tried to engage her in conversation, but she didn't want any part of it. I'd already checked her personnel records. She had earned her reserve commission from a Southern military/agricultural school, and she came from a long line of army officers. Her father had retired as a colonel and her grandfather had been a general in World War II. She even had some ancestors who'd fought on both sides of the Civil War.

Lieutenant Burcshoff was the only female payroll officer, and she was the only payroll officer to have been robbed. I couldn't tell which was worse for her, the humiliation of being robbed or the humiliation



of losing her grandfather's pearl-handled .45.

All the way back to Seoul she sat with her face set in stone.

That afternoon the stolen jeep turned up at the Seoul train station. Ernie and I hustled over there.

It was parked in front of the main red brick building next to other military vehicles belonging to the 8th Army Rail Transportation Office. There were many ways to leave the train station: by train, bus, subway, or taxi. Ernie and I interviewed a few of the ticket sellers and the security officers who controlled the taxi queue, but no one remembered two Americans in civilian clothes parking a jeep and walking away.

There were plenty of fingerprints on the jeep, none of which were likely to do us much good without the perpetrators.

Back at the C.I.D. office we were told that General Skulgrin, the commanding general of 8th Army, was hopping mad that someone would steal an army payroll. He wanted the thieves caught, and he wanted them caught immediately—sooner was preferred.

Overseas, GI's are paid not in greenbacks but in Military Payment Certificates. The theory is that Communist agents won't be able to hoard a bunch of U.S.

dollars and buy arms on the international market. Also, government officials fear that a few tons of U.S. green in the local economy could lessen the value of the *won*, the Korean national currency. Eighth Army has a press in Japan that prints up the MPC's, and each bill is assigned a serial number. Since GI's generally aren't big spenders, there are no denominations larger than a twenty.

At 8th Army Finance, Ernie and I obtained a list of the serial numbers issued to Lieutenant Burcshoff. We passed it up the chain of command to the provost marshal, who showed the 8th Army CG. The next thing we knew, 8th Army Finance had a task force formed to search all incoming MPC's and report the appearance of any of the stolen bills.

We heard a lot of grumbling from the finance clerks. It was going to mean a lot of extra work for them.

Ernie and I had the easy job, waiting for one of the stolen bills to turn up.

About three days later, one did. Turned in at the bank on Yongsan, the headquarters compound for 8th Army. The problem was that it was part of the main PX cash deposit. No telling who had spent it there. Maybe one of the thieves. Maybe some-

body they'd passed the bill off to. We were no closer than we had been.

It was a little disheartening, but Ernie and I took it philosophically. There was no way the crooks could leave the country with that much MPC. Every bag on every flight leaving Korea, whether military or civilian, is searched by a customs agent—one of the benefits of investigative work in a country that lives in constant fear of terrorism.

On the fourth morning after the robbery we got a break.

The alert siren sounded, vehicles were prohibited from entering or leaving the compound, and the commanding general declared all Military Payment Certificates null and void. Everyone in 8th Army was instructed to turn in their old MPC's to their unit commander in exchange for the new Military Payment Certificates. They were bright orange. The old bills had been blue.

At five P.M., close of duty day, all the old blue MPC's would become worthless.

The change in MPC's made the finance clerks' search a lot easier. Everyone who turned in the blue MPC's had to produce military identification and sign a register that said how much they were exchanging and, if it was over a hundred dollars'

worth, declare the source of the money.

A lot of lightbulbs burned at 8th Army Finance that night. Ernie and I paced the reception room, sipping coffee, waiting for something to break. Nothing did.

At about oh-dark-thirty, one of the clerks shoved my arm. "You Agent Sueño?"

I rubbed my eyes. "That's me."

"Here's the register with the stolen bills. A whole stack of them."

Ernie rose from a vinyl-cushioned couch, stretched, and leaned over me and the clerk as we studied the register. "MED-DAC," I said. The 8th Army Medical Command. "Six hundred bucks. Turned in by Specialist/4 Crossnut, Reginald R."

A Spec/4 pulls down about two hundred and fifty dollars a month.

The clerk pointed to the remarks section of the register. "Claimed he made the money gambling."

"The old standby," Ernie said.

We splashed some water on our faces in the latrine and ran outside. The first fingers of dawn crept over distant hills. On the wide cement porch we almost bowled over Lieutenant Burcshoff. She wore an immaculately pressed dress green uniform that clung to the curves of her lean body.

"You have a lead?" she asked.

Ernie grinned. "We got 'em nailed. Just a matter of time now. When you see those two thieves again, they'll be standing in a lineup."

A shadow of concern crossed the even features of her face.

We didn't have time to chat. Ernie and I ran to the jeep and drove to the barracks of the 8th Army Medical Command.

Specialist/4 Reginald R. Crossnut wasn't tall and blond, and he wasn't short with brown hair. He was black. And pissed off when Ernie yanked on his mattress and rolled him out of the rack. He hopped to his feet, swinging bony fists, cursing.

"Who the *hell* do you think you are?"

Ernie shoved him up against a wall locker.

"We're C.I.D. agents," Ernie said. "And we've been up all night and we're pissed off and we don't like thieves. Where'd you get the six hundred dollars in MPC's?"

Crossnut's eyes widened, realizing the trouble he was in. He glanced back and forth between us. Ernie and I looked as if we hadn't shaved in a week.

"The money is *mine*!" Crossnut said. He tried to wriggle out of Ernie's grasp, but it didn't work. "I won it in a poker game."

Ernie clicked steadily on his ginseng gum, breathing into Crossnut's face. "Gambling isn't legal in Korea, Crossnut. Not on compound. Not off compound."

Apparently Crossnut hadn't considered that. His brow wrinkled.

"You can tell us the story of where the six hundred bucks came from," Ernie continued, "and be on your way. Or we can arrest you right now for illegal gambling. Self-confessed."

He shoved Crossnut higher up against the wall locker. I stepped in closer. "Who's your blackmarket mama-san, Crossnut?" I asked.

"Ain't got no mama-san," he replied. Ernie knotted his fist and cocked it. He wasn't acting. I'd seen him rough up suspects before. Crossnut studied Ernie's face and apparently lost all doubts about his intentions. "I got a papa-san," Crossnut said.

"Out in Itaewon?" I asked.

Crossnut nodded slowly. "You going to bust me?"

"Not if you give us the straight story."

He studied our faces: tired, grim, ready to punch out his lights if he didn't open up.

"His name's Mr. Kang. Works out of the back of the Black Widow Club. He's a good dude. Knows how to treat the brothers. You mess with him, I'll have a lot of dudes down."

**K**ang wasn't much of a papa-san. Still in his twenties, he was too young for the role, as skinny as a broom handle, and wearing a red silk shirt and three gold chains around his neck. We were in the empty bar of the Black Widow Club. The place reeked of barf, beer and disinfectant. All the chairs were turned up atop the cocktail tables, and an old woman sloshed suds on the floor with a dirty mop.

Kang chain-smoked between lips that were too thin. "Where I get MPC's not your business," he said.

Ernie grabbed a handful of red silk and leaned into his face. "If you want, Kang, we'll call the Korean National Police. The commanding general of 8th Army is pissed to the max about this stolen payroll. All it takes is one phone call from him to the KNP honcho and they'll have you locked in the monkey house for twenty years."

Ernie shoved him back. The cigarette flopped out of Kang's mouth and sizzled in the slick suds. His eyes narrowed as he straightened his shirt.

"A lot of GI's change money in Black Widow Club," Kang said. "How I know which one?"

"Six hundred dollars," I said. "You remember."

Kang shrugged, thinking it

over. His blackmarket and illicit currency exchange operation depended on the cooperation of the Korean National Police. He probably paid them a stipend each month to look the other way. But if a lot of grief rolled downhill from the 8th Army commander and the chief of police of the Yongsan precinct, the local KNP's would be embarrassed. And when corrupt cops get embarrassed, they also get angry. And they take it out on the crook who embarrassed them.

All these thoughts played themselves out on the features of Kang's shifty face. Finally muscles stopped twitching. He'd made his decision.

"Maybe you no believe," Kang said. "The guy with the six hundred, he not soul brother."

"Who was he?"

"Everybody surprise. Tall white dude walk in Black Widow Club, ask for me, want to do business. Later I check. He do business with a lot of blackmarket mama-san. Change much MPC in Itaewon."

"So you weren't his only stop?"

Kang shook his head.

It figured. With ten thousand dollars to exchange for Korean currency, the thief would have to use more than one fence. Later, he could take the *won* to a Korean bank and use them to

buy international money orders in U.S. dollars. Mail them home. Stuff them in a bank account somewhere.

"What was this dude's name?" Ernie asked.

"I don't know. Tall. White hair. That's all I know."

"You must know something more about him." Kang didn't answer. "Think hard, Kang. Your next interrogation will be conducted by the KNP."

Ernie smiled. Civil liberties were about the last thing the local Korean cops were worried about.

Kang took his time lighting another cigarette. "He have black stuff on his fingers," he said, "like maybe he work on car. Later I see him with other GI's."

"You know these GI's?"

Kang nodded.

"And they're all in the same unit?"

Kang nodded again.

"Which is?"

"Twenty-one T Car."

The 21st Transportation Company (Car). The main motor pool for 8th Army headquarters.

When Captain Turntwist, the commander of 21 T Car, saw two C.I.D. agents stride into his office, his narrow forehead crinkled like an accordion.

"What have they done this time?" he asked.

The troops of the motor pool weren't known for being sedate during their off-duty hours. They ran a neck-and-neck contest with the 8th Army Honor Guard for the number of times one of their members appeared on the MP blotter report.

I ignored his question. "I'd like to see a roster of duty assignments for your drivers."

Ernie pulled out another stick of gum and looked at me. Curiously. He had expected us to look through the personnel folders, searching for two GI's who matched the descriptions given by Sergeant Holtbaker and Lieutenant Burcshoff. I had another idea.

Without argument, Captain Turntwist instructed his company clerk to provide me with the information. After ten minutes I came up with a list of names. I showed them to Captain Turntwist. "Is one of these men tall, blond, and thin?" I asked.

Turntwist took the list out of my hands and studied it. "Yeah. Three of them," he said.

"Does one of those three have a best buddy who is average height with brown hair?"

He stabbed his finger at a name. "Dartworth, Private First Class."

I found his name on the assignment list. "He's been driving a sedan for the Protocol Office."

"Right," Captain Turntwist

said. "Shuttling officers to and from 8th Army social functions:"

"You need a personable guy for that."

"That's why we selected him."

"And his buddy's name?"

"Frankton."

"Where are they now?"

"The entire unit's in the auditorium. Mandatory winter driving class."

"We need to talk to both of them."

Captain Turntwist told the clerk to pull them out of training. While we waited, Ernie and I walked out onto the big cement entranceway.

"What made you look at their assignments?" Ernie asked.

"Something about this case's been bugging me. A few things."

"But Protocol. Why would a couple of payroll thieves have anything to do with the 8th Army Protocol Office?"

We heard the heavy tromp of combat boots down the hallway. "No time now," I said.

Dartworth was indeed tall and blond, and goodlooking enough to have a shot at doing Hollywood hair oil commercials. His short buddy, on the other hand, would've looked more at home modeling leopard skins. The tight muscles of Frankton's wide shoulders were knotted, as were his fists.

I decided to start with the formalities.

I pulled a copy of the Uniform Code of Military Justice from a bookshelf behind the clerk's desk and handed it to the commander of the 21st Transportation Company (Car). "Captain Turntwist," I said, "would you do me a favor and read these two gentlemen their rights?"

After we separated them, it took only a few minutes for Frankton to confess. It was all his tall, goodlooking buddy's idea, he said.

"Dartworth knew what time they'd be picking up the payroll, how much it would be, even the name of the sergeant who would accompany the payroll officer."

"How'd he know all this?" Ernie asked.

Frankton shrugged. "A friend told him."

"A friend?"

"For the last couple of months my good buddy Dartworth has been popping an officer and a lady."

We waited. I almost whispered the question. "Lieutenant Burcshoff?"

Frankton nodded. "That's right. Lieutenant Burcshoff."

While we searched their rooms, I explained to Ernie what had made me decide to look for a driver who might've had some chance of meeting



Lieutenant Burcshoff prior to the robbery.

The first thing that seemed screwy was her stopping for a couple of GI's in civvies who stood on the curb and waved her down. Sharing rides is common in 8th Army but not when you have ten thousand dollars in military payroll in the back seat.

And the fact that she'd been vague in her description of the two thieves although she was a top graduate of her reserve officer class. Sergeant Holtbaker, who'd been bopped over the head, had noticed more detail than she had.

Also, when Ernie and I picked her up in Kimpo, she couldn't believe that the thieves had stolen her treasured family heirloom, the pearl-handled .45.

What had she expected from a couple of payroll hijackers? Normally they'll take anything of value. Her shock didn't make sense unless she knew more about these two particular thieves than she was willing to tell us.

And outside 8th Army Finance this morning, when Ernie told her that the arrest of the culprits was imminent, she seemed sad. Not elated.

In Dartworth's locker we found eight thousand dollars' worth of the old blue Military Payment Certificates.

An MP patrol arrived. They

handcuffed Dartworth and Frankton and took them to the MP station to be booked.

It was then that something dawned on me.

"We've got trouble, Ernie."

"What trouble? We wrapped up the case."

"Not completely. What about her pearl-handled pistol?"

"You worry too much, George. Those two jerks probably sold it on the black market."

"Not a gun they didn't."

Korea has total gun control. Only the military and the police are allowed to possess firearms. Because of the threat of North Korean Communist spies, trafficking in guns has only one penalty: death. And it is enforced. Absolutely. Even the people who run the black market wouldn't be foolish enough to buy firearms.

Ernie nodded, seeing my point. "So what did Dartworth do with it?"

"Only one place that makes any sense."

"What's that?"

"He gave it back to Lieutenant Burcshoff."

"Good. She owns it. So what's the problem?"

"She's the problem."

I made a call to the Aviation Detachment headquarters and spoke to the commanding officer.

"Lieutenant Burcshoff? No. We've been looking for her, too.

She disappeared about an hour ago. Not like her. Not like her at all."

I slammed down the phone. Ernie and I ran to the jeep.

We found her in the Women Officer's Quarters. Sitting in the recreation room, television off, small refrigerator humming in the corner. She seemed calm. Wearing cutoff bluejeans and a loose sweatshirt with the name of her alma mater blazoned across the front. She looked exactly like a hardworking young woman relaxing on her day off except for one thing. She pointed the barrel of her pearl-handled .45 right between my eyes.

Ernie lifted his hands slowly out to his sides. "It won't do any good, Lieutenant Burcshoff. Just tell the truth, and it will all be over soon. Maybe you were in on it with them, maybe you weren't."

She barked at him. "I *wasn't* in on it with them. It was that sonofabitch Dartworth." Her eyes started to glisten with tears. "I know it was wrong, an officer fraternizing with an enlisted man. But I met him while he was driving us to the Officer's Club. He seemed so cheerful. So full of life."

With the back of her hand she wiped away the tears, still keeping the pistol trained on us.

"So it wasn't your fault," Ernie

said. "You didn't know that Dartworth and his buddy were going to hit Sergeant Holtbaker over the head. You didn't know they were going to steal the payroll. All you did was stop when he waved you down."

She shook her head. "I did more than that."

Ernie and I waited. The silence grew long. Finally her eyes blazed with fury. "I didn't shoot the sonofabitch!"

Ernie and I flinched. I started to edge my way along the wall. If she had to swivel to take aim, she might not be able to plug both of us.

As quickly as it had come, the fury subsided.

"It's a matter of honor," she said. "The money in that satchel was the hard-earned pay of soldiers in the Aviation Detachment. Soldiers under my command. Not receiving it when they were supposed to receive it caused a lot of hardship. Rents they couldn't pay, groceries they couldn't buy, money they couldn't send home to their families."

And booze they couldn't buy down in the red light district, I thought, but I didn't say anything.

She gazed at us, eyes wide, as if wondering if we'd understand. "It was my duty as an officer, as one sworn to obey the orders of those appointed above me, to protect that payroll. With

my life, if need be. I should've pulled out this pistol and aimed it at Dartworth's blond head and blown his damn brains out!"

Ernie held out his hand, expecting the gun to go off. It didn't. She paid no attention to our discomfort but seemed wrapped in a world of her own misery. Ernie took a step to his left.

"Instead, what did I do?" she asked. "I took the soft way out. I thought of my own feelings, of my own failure to live as an officer first and as a woman second. I didn't live up to my responsibilities."

"Hey," Ernie said. "You liked the guy. Of course you didn't want to kill him. You're only human."

Coming from Ernie, the biggest woman-chasing, booze-guzzling ville rat in 8th Army, I almost laughed out loud at the remark. Lieutenant Burcshoff shook her head vehemently.

"My dad told me becoming an officer would be tough. My grandfather told me it would be tough. They told me if I couldn't handle the job, if my personal life was more important to me than doing my duty, then I should never put on the uniform of an officer of the United States Army."

Most of the officers I knew only talked a good game. The truth was that they *always* put their careers and their personal goals

above their duty to God and country. I was about to tell Lieutenant Burcshoff this when a red light flashed outside the window. Ernie glanced over. "The commanding general," he said.

A line of staff cars led by an MP jeep was pulling up in front of the Women Officer's Quarters. A blue flag spangled with four stars fluttered in front of the longest sedan. Someone at the MP station must've notified the CG, General Skulgrin, that we were on our way to arrest one of his officers.

When Lieutenant Burcshoff glanced outside, Ernie stole another step towards the humming refrigerator. "The CG is here for you," I told her. "Because he respects you and doesn't want anything to happen to you."

"You're lying," she said. "It's just more MP's come to arrest me."

The commanding general of 8th Army, tall and lean and craggy-faced, climbed out of the back seat of his sedan. "I'm not lying," I said. "He's come to help you."

"It's too late," she said. "I've humiliated my family. I've dishonored the officer corps."

With his back against the refrigerator Ernie could reach one of the plateglass windows. He rapped his fingers lightly and

caught the attention of one of the MP's outside. As he turned and looked, Ernie flipped him the bird.

The MP's face crinkled in rage. "Screw you, too, Bascom," he shouted.

That was enough for Lieutenant Burcshoff to swivel her head and the barrel of the pistol along with it. I took two running steps and leapt across the couch. Ernie charged at the same time.

Lieutenant Burcshoff, with the reflexes of a tennis pro, backed off at the last moment. Ernie and I crashed into one another. Still, I was able to fling out my right hand and grab hold of one of her wrists. With all my strength I wrenched her arm toward the ground. She screamed, jerked her arm away, and twisted the barrel of the .45 toward her mouth.

Ernie kicked and flailed beneath me. A shot rang out. The smell of gunpowder exploded up my nostrils.

Heavy boots pounded down the hallway, and a herd of elephants crashed through the door.

I kept grabbing and turning and twisting, hoping to keep her from firing again. Finally a pair of knees ground into my back. MP's knelt above me and hand-

cuffed my hands behind me. In the confusion no one knew who was friend or foe. They sat me up against a bookcase.

They dragged Ernie, kicking and screaming, behind the safety of the couch.

General Skulgrin, the 8th Army commander, marched into the room. He knelt next to Lieutenant Burcshoff, one khaki-covered knee sopping up a puddle of blood. He turned his head and bellowed an order. "Get an ambulance! *Now!*"

Ernie was still wrestling with the MP he'd given the finger to. I heard knuckles crack on bone, and then reinforcements held Ernie to the ground until he finally stopped struggling.

General Skulgrin stuck gnarled fingers into the base of Burcshoff's neck, feeling for a pulse. There wasn't much left of the top of her skull. Finally he spoke to the MP officer hovering nearby. "Cancel the ambulance. She's dead."

He started to reach for the pearl-handled .45. A voice erupted in the room. To my surprise I realized it was mine.

"Don't touch it! That pistol belongs to *her!* Not to her father. Not to her grandfather. Not to anyone else. It belongs to *her!*"

All eyes in the room stared at me, figuring I'd gone mad.

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# A NEW WAY EVERY DAY

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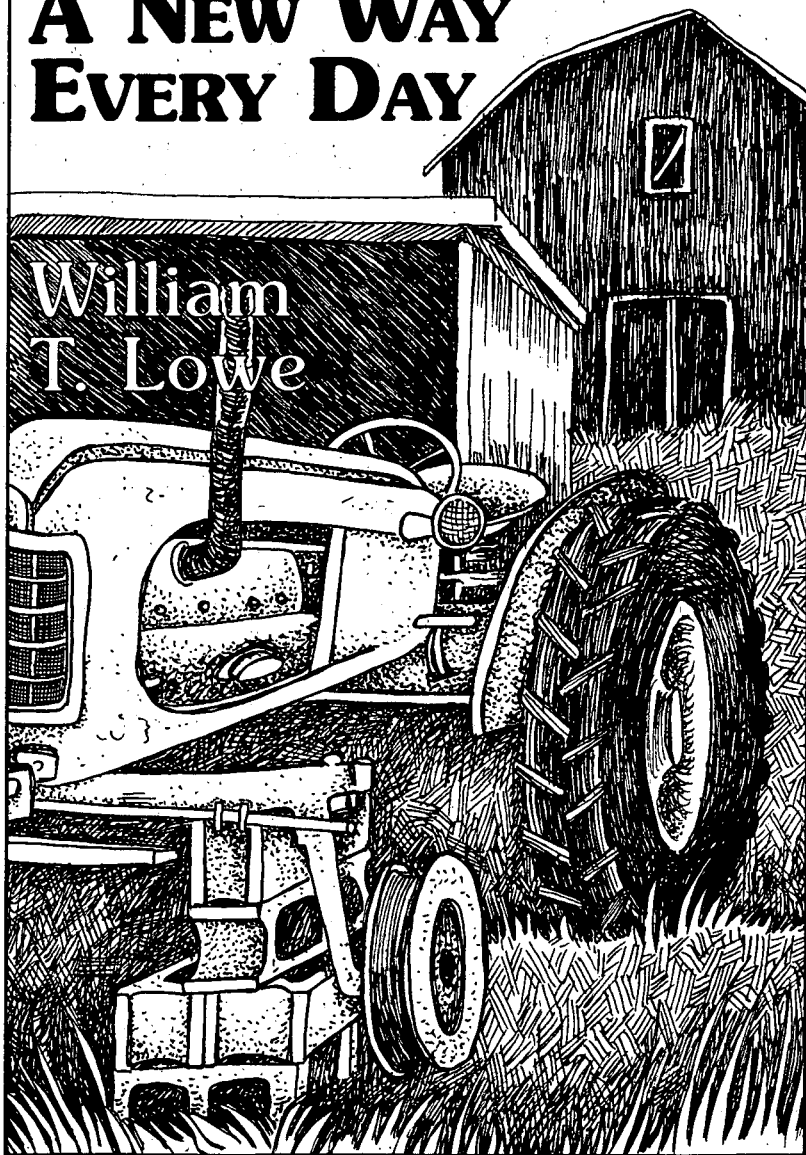


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I had forgotten how noisy it can be inside a helicopter. I was riding in the cargo area with a National Guard tech sergeant and a New York state trooper. They were in uniform; I was a guest, on the logbook as a civilian consultant.

I pointed at a patch of green on the ground. At two thousand feet it looked like a postage stamp. In the strong midday sunshine it was emerald green, almost neon bright. I touched the tech's arm.

"Marijuana," I said.

He glanced at a map taped to a big piece of plywood. There were several red circles on the map. "We've got that one," he said.

Below us was a section of the Adirondack Mountains in Essex County, New York. The Guard makes flights like this to search for marijuana, little cultivated patches in open fields or along streams. I had asked to come along to check out a hunch of mine. I'm a retired deputy sheriff, I used to hunt pot growers in these hills years ago, and I think I still have a feel for it.

In my day the use of pot was mostly recreational. Now it's a business, and growing bigger every year. In the three counties of northern New York it's a cash crop, like apples and corn and hay.

Law enforcement agencies

haven't been asleep. In 1989 the National Guard formed a Counterdrug Detachment to work with the state police and local authorities. That's how I happened to be riding in a Guard chopper loaded with surveillance gear.

The game plan was to locate stands of marijuana plants from the air and on foot and keep them under observation. When the grower came around to inspect his crop, he would be nabbed. If he managed to evade arrest, the state police would confiscate the plants at harvest time and destroy them.

I told the pilot, a Guard lieutenant, the area I wanted to cover. The little town of Fountain appeared, and he banked to follow Route 10 south. With my glasses I checked off landmarks. The Blumbard farm was six miles out of town, half a mile past an old gravel pit and down a long lane on the east side of the highway.

"There it is," I said on the intercom as the farm slid behind us.

The pilot made a leisurely turn and came back. He slowed our speed until we were almost hovering. My stomach went up three points on the queasy scale.

The tech bent over a control panel and twisted some dials. Mounted in the nose of the chopper was a heat sensing de-



vice. The thing was incredibly sensitive; if you struck a match a hundred yards away, it would instantly pinpoint your position.

A needle jumped on a scale, and the tech turned around and grinned at me.

"Bingo," he said. "You're right, Mr. Sessions, that barn is hot."

The state trooper marked our location on a big photo blowup. "Looks like we're going visiting," he said. I was pretty sure I'd be invited to go along.

**T**hree days before my helicopter ride I was sitting on my front porch about to take a nap when Leon came to see me. He's a young trooper who graduated from the academy in Albany last year and is assigned to Troop B over in Ray Brook. He's tall and thin and still looks eighteen. That's why he draws a lot of undercover assignments.

Instead of making small talk he handed me a leaflet.

GROW YOUR OWN!

ELIMINATE THE MIDDLEMAN!

BE THE ENVY OF YOUR FRIENDS!

"Damn," I said. "Where'd this come from?"

"They're all over the school," Leon told me. He meant the big central school in Fountain.

It was a poorly printed hand-

bill, about six by nine, on cheap stock. I read the rest of it.

*If you think Mexican Gold is great, wait till you try Panama Pride! It's easy to grow your own. Start your own seeds in a coffee can, then plant them in a sunny spot and step back. Will grow to five feet or more in one short season with a little water and TLC. All for you—and your friends. Drop your name and address and a five dollar bill in the old 88 at Fountain. Fast, confidential service!*

Of course it was talking about marijuana. Maybe there was a strain called Panama Pride, maybe not. The leaflet would be the topic of conversation all over school.

"I guess you know pot use has gone way up," Leon said.

"I know. I read the papers." Marijuana use is up twenty percent nationally, that much and more here.

More young lives wasted, sometimes snuffed out.

"Didn't mean to snap at you, Leon. Here, have some lemonade."

"Thanks, Uncle Hank."

Leon calls me Uncle Hank, but he's not really a relative. His father and I did a hitch in the military police some wars back.

I looked at the leaflet again.

"This has got to be a scam. Get the money and run."

He nodded. "That's what Captain Morris thinks. But we've got to check it out."

"Of course," I said. Even if it was a ripoff, it would do a lot of harm just by attracting attention. More kids would experiment, take that first step downward.

Leon cleared his throat.

"We're wondering if you have time to do some checking, Uncle Hank. You know, the post office, anybody with new money."

"I'll be glad to." I had to remind him of something; I held up the leaflet. "This doesn't exactly say post office box eighty-eight. Could be something else."

"I know. We're investigating street addresses."

"It could be a locker at school. Or see if anybody wears the number eighty-eight on his uniform."

"Right." He stood up to leave.

"One other thing, Leon," I said. "Pushers aren't going to like any potential competition one little bit. Have some copies of this thing made and spread them around in the right places in Keeseville and Plattsburgh. Might get you some anonymous tips."

"Good idea. We'll do that." He shook his head. "Joe Camel was bad enough. What's next? Peter Pot?"

"Maybe Gertrude Grass. No law says women can't be pushers."

Grow your own. Cannabis, to use its formal name, is fairly easy to grow if you know what you're doing. Somebody could make some money with this scheme. Maybe he was planning to sell the seeds. Maybe he had an angle I hadn't thought of.

Years ago when I was a young deputy, pot growers would plant their marijuana in the middle of a cornfield where it wouldn't be seen. Frequently we got an anonymous tip and arrested them for possession. Then they planted the stuff in a neighbor's field. Naturally this resulted in many hard feelings.

They got smart and planted on state-owned land, of which there are several million acres around here. Then they began stealing each other's plants. That led to security measures like booby traps and armed guards. We lost a few deer, and some people got shot.

A rudimentary science evolved. Pot growers learned that a little cultivation gives a better yield. That there are male and female plants, that pollination takes place as in fruit trees.

A new strain was developed, better suited to our northern climate. A seedless plant was produced with a higher level of

THC, which is the psychoactive element in pot.

The local dealers know about the national movement to legalize marijuana, and most of them are in favor of it. But obviously a "grow your own" wave would not be in their best interests.

Was there a new player in the game?

I like to avoid the heat of the day, but now a nap was out of the question. I decided to check out the post office in Fountain. An old schoolmate of mine ran it.

Hannah McCain started out as a window clerk when the post office was in a corner of the general store. She sold stamps and plug tobacco and yard goods.

She is as gray as I am now, and there's always a grim look on her face. Either her dentures don't fit right or her feet hurt. Everybody gets the rough side of her tongue.

"Hannah, I have to ask you who rents box 88." We sat at her desk behind the parcel post rack.

"You know I can't tell you that, Hank."

"It's important. Somebody may be selling dope through the mails."

"The hell you say." She glared at me. I showed her the leaflet.

"Damn! What'll the bastards do next? Give out free samples?"

She looked at me and then

opened a drawer in her desk and took out a ledger book. "I'm going to the little girls' room," she said and walked away.

Box 88 was rented to a Mr. Jiggs Blumbard, Route 10. When Hannah came back, the book was right where she had left it.

"By the way, Hannah," I said, being very casual, "do you know a party named Jiggs Blumbard?"

"I know him. He's an idiot."

"He's on one of your rural delivery routes. Why do you suppose he gets his mail here in town?"

"Gives him an excuse to get out of work on his farm. Come to town to get the mail. Hang out at the feed store with the other deadbeats."

I stood up. "If he starts getting some mail just addressed to Box 88, let me know, will you?"

"Before or after I tell the FBI?"

I ignored her. "Thanks, Hannah."

"Be careful, Hank." Her tone softened a bit. "What are you going to do now?"

"Get a haircut. Nice seeing you again, Hannah."

A barbershop has always been a good place to ask questions. I sat through a discussion of a new convenience store that might open in Fountain. If it

did, it would hurt business at Tim Meyer's Sunoco station. Finally I got a chance to mention Jiggs Blumbard's name.

I was surprised at the reaction that got. Blumbard was a local celebrity.

Blumbard had a son in junior high school, and this spring he had coached the boy to spit on the floor in class. Every class, every day. The school had fussed and fumed to no avail. Finally the school board judged the boy to be emotionally disturbed and sent him home. In addition to welfare and disability, Blumbard was now collecting an extra four hundred dollars a month in supplemental income to finance the boy's rehabilitation.

I know the incorrigible-child scheme has been used successfully in cities downstate, but here in the north country Blumbard was a pioneer. It made him a hero to his cronies. To celebrate, Blumbard had bought a new twenty foot fishing boat with a huge outboard motor.

Later, at the Sunoco station, someone pointed Jiggs Blumbard out to me. He was in his mid-forties, cleanshaven, below average height. Puffy cheeks and large protruding eyes gave him the innocent look of a crafty old squirrel.

He was filling six five-gallon gas cans in the bed of a Chevy

pickup truck. I stood in the doorway with Tim Meyers, the owner, and watched him. To make conversation I said, "Needs gas for his tractor, I suppose."

"Reckon so."

"Pretty late for spring plowing."

"If anybody on that farm does any plowing, it'll be the boy. Jiggs is too lazy."

Tim was understandably bitter. He worked six days a week and shared a Ford with his family. Jiggs didn't work at all and owned a Buick and a Honda.

Post Office Box 88 had been a dead end for the prospect of pot seeds through the mail. I got back on Route 10 and headed home. After a few miles I realized that Blumbard's pickup was ahead of me.

I slowed down to follow him, an old habit. I watched him turn into a lane on his right and drive down to a small house. A boy about fourteen came out to unload the truck.

I pulled off on the shoulder to get a look at the Blumbard farm. A small frame house. A lean-to garage. A tractor parked outside the garage. Behind the house was an old barn badly in need of paint. There was a nice view of the mountains to the south behind the farm.

I drove on; I didn't want to attract attention. Something about the tractor had caught my

eye, but I wasn't sure what it was.

Outside Fountain I passed the big central school, a long, U-shaped building. A fleet of twenty buses brought children from all over the district. A large parking lot was jammed with cars. I wondered how many of the kids in school would think growing their own marijuana plants was a neat thing to do.

Late the next morning I drove back to the Blumbard farm. I had to get a closer look at that tractor. When I drove down the lane, I saw that Jiggs's truck was gone, probably on some errand in town. There was no sign of the boy.

The new boat sat on its trailer in front of the house on display to anyone who passed by, testimony to the Blumbard wealth and social standing.

Years ago I had lost my inhibitions about entering someone else's property. If the owner came storming out of his house and demanded to know what I was doing, I simply opened my coat and let him see my badge. Then I looked him in the eye and said, "Police business." That got instant cooperation.

Of course now I don't wear a badge. But I carry a clipboard. If I'm challenged, I can say I work for Social Services. I do investigate fraud cases from time to

time, and most people drawing unemployment or disability checks are afraid not to cooperate.

I opened the gate and walked in. There was a tidy flowerbed beside the porch, and the yard had been raked recently. Inside the house a television set was on; I could hear the usual wild audience applause.

A woman came out the screen door, wiping her hands on her apron. She had to be Mrs. Blumbard. "Can I hep you, mister?"

I touched the brim of my hat. "Just want to look at your electric meter, ma'am, thank you."

She was relieved to learn my errand was not important. She nodded and retreated inside. I went around the side of the house where the service drop and the meter were located. From there I had a good view of the tractor.

I was right; something was wrong with it. The front axle was supported by cinder blocks, and the left wheel was missing. Tall weeds grew around the large rear wheels. This tractor hadn't been moved for months.

I turned to go back to my car. The new boat wasn't going near the water anytime soon. The tractor couldn't be driven. Why did Jiggs buy all that gas?

Then I heard a sound, the sound of an engine. Like a chain

saw back in the woods, but regular and steady. At that moment the wind changed, and the sound became a bit louder. It was a generator.

With electric power right here at the house why would anybody want to run a generator?

When I got home, there was a call from Leon. "We got the eighty-eight guy, Uncle Hank. Captain Morris thought you might want to see him. I'll pick you up, okay?"

I was tired, but I agreed—Ralph Morris is an old friend. By the time I got the dog fed, Leon was at the door in a troop-er's car.

"Remember what the leaflet said?" Leon asked. "Put your money in an 88 at Fountain?"

"I remember. Was it a sedan or a station wagon?"

"Curses." He stared at me. "How'd you know?"

"I guessed." The printing on the leaflet was sloppy; it had come to me that the phrase "old 88" in the last line was supposed to be "Olds 88." But I shouldn't have spoiled Leon's surprise. "Tell me about it," I said.

"I was nosing around the school, and I saw this crowd in the parking lot. There it was, an older model Oldsmobile. And get this—it had pot plants painted all over it. Right! The drawings were pretty wild, but you could

tell what they were supposed to be.

"Those 'Grow Your Own' leaflets were taped to the windows all around the car. One window was rolled down a few inches, and there was a box on the front seat. And get this, Uncle Hank, there was a line of kids shoving envelopes through the window and high-fiving each other. Stupid!"

"Anyway, there was this guy hanging around, and I asked him if it was his car and he said it was, and I arrested him."

"What'd you charge him with?"

"Scheming to defraud. The captain and the D.A. might want to add endangering the welfare of minors. Most of the kids were under eighteen, you know."

Ralph Morris was waiting for us at the satellite station in Keeseville. I live just outside of town, and I appreciated being spared the long trip to headquarters in Ray Brook. The car had been towed in and secured behind a chain link fence.

Morris and I sat behind a desk in a small interrogation room. Leon brought in the suspect. His name was Jerry Dunn; he was a student at the Rainbow Lake Community College. He was a very young man, sandy hair, slight build, with what would have been an eager expression.

I know the type—there are Jerry Dunns on every campus. They join every debating team in sight and think Thoreau was the greatest brain since Plato.

His face brightened when he saw two older men. He thought he was going to have an intellectual conversation. He had done something clever, and he wanted to be commended.

He was disappointed. Captain Morris barely glanced at him. "What's the charge?" he asked Leon.

"Possession of a stolen vehicle."

"A common car thief, eh?" Morris looked disgusted. "Any priors?"

"Checking on that now, sir."

"You find out who the car is registered to?"

"A Mr. Edward Franklin, 200 Prospect, Watertown."

Morris turned to me. "What's auto theft now, Henry?"

"One to three years," I said. "This young squirt will probably go to one of the shock camps."

Jerry Dunn looked worried. He hadn't liked being labeled "common" and "squirt."

"Who did that crummy painting on the car?" Morris asked him.

"I did."

Morris made a note. "Criminal mischief."

"Another one to three," I said. "That may get him into Dan-

nemora." I looked at Jerry. "Lots of bad boys in Dannemora."

"Wait a minute!" Jerry said. "I borrowed the car, and the paint will come off."

Morris looked skeptical. "That man in Watertown a friend of yours?"

"My cousin, sir."

Morris looked at me. My turn to ask questions.

"You both in this together? This plan to cheat people out of their money?"

"I didn't cheat anybody!" Jerry insisted. "I didn't!"

"You took those kids' money, didn't you?"

"No, sir. They just put their money in the box on the front seat. There was no intent to defraud . . ." He wanted to make a speech, but I cut him off.

"Just another cheap con," I said. "Why didn't you throw in some gold mine stock?"

I pushed my chair back. "Lock him up."

Jerry Dunn was disappointed. Nobody had said his scheme was original, nobody thought he was smart. And he was getting scared.

Captain Morris nodded. "Hold him for the judge."

"Wait a minute!" Jerry looked from me to Morris and back again. "I'm writing a paper for school. This was an exercise in applied psychology. You know,



the power of suggestion, of group mindsets. It's my own project."

I looked at him. "Whose class are you in?" I asked.

"Dr. Edwin Mimms."

Leon left the room.

"Tell me about this cousin of yours. Is he a college student, too?"

"Er, no. He's in business."

"What kind of business?"

"He works for his father."

In a minute Leon was back. "There is a Dr. Mimms at the college. He teaches psychology."

"Too bad he doesn't teach a class in staying out of jail," Morris said. "Lock up this young man, officer."

"Wait a minute," I said. Jerry looked at me as if I held a last-minute reprieve.

"Jerry, you and your cousin Eddie were in this together, weren't you? You never intended to mail out any seeds, did you?" I was fishing, but there had been a lot of drug activity in Wartner town.

Jerry gave me a grateful look and shook his head.

"Eddie's a pusher, right? You wanted material for your paper, and Eddie wanted a prospect list for his pot sales. Eddie wants to sell pot around the high school, and you helped him."

Jerry stared at the floor and nodded. There was a long silence.

"Where's Eddie now?" Morris asked. Jerry gave him an address. "Put him away."

Leon took Jerry Dunn's arm to lead him out.

"Sir?" Jerry said to me. I turned around. "I'm still going to write that paper," he said.

"You do that," I said. "I think you'll do a fine job."

"Thank you, sir." He was smiling as Leon led him away.

On the way home I recalled what an old sheriff told me one time: "People stay up nights figuring out new ways to break the law. There's a new way every day."

"And there's more of them than of us," I said.

"Yes, but we're smarter than they are," he said. "We have to be."

I went to bed early. Tomorrow I was going to visit the Blumbard farm again.

**"A**ll right, you guys, you know the drill. Watch for tripwires. Roberts, you take the left side of the barn and secure that generator. Sessions, you stay behind me. You copy?"

"Understood."

There were six men in the raiding party including a top sergeant who wasn't fond of civilians' getting in his way. His

detail had been on search missions like this before. I was included as an observer.

Three of us took the path that led to the door of the little barn. The other men fanned out and approached slowly through the high grass and weeds. The sun was hot, and there was no breeze.

This was a joint operation between the State Police Narcotics Unit and the Guard Counterdrug Detachment. We had descended on the Blumbard place at midmorning. The dooryard was crowded with dark blue police cars and multihued personnel carriers. Jiggs and his family were being detained on the front porch by a police officer. Out on the highway a trooper kept curious traffic moving.

The old barn looked totally deserted. The one window on the side facing us had been boarded up. We could hear the even pounding of the generator. Again I told myself I could be wrong, that there could be some innocent reason why an old barn was giving off those waves of heat that could be picked up by a snooping helicopter.

"Hold it!" a man on my right said suddenly. "We've got something."

The sergeant snapped a look back at me.

"Freeze, pop."

He stepped back a few paces and then over to join the man.

It was a tripwire, a length of fishing line stretched at ankle height. Carefully the man who had spotted it traced it to a corner of the barn. The line ran up through eyehooks to a shotgun fastened under the eave. A careless step would have pulled the trigger. The gun would have fired into the air, but it would have scared the heck out of a casual prowler.

Ten minutes later we were at the barn door. It was secured by a heavy padlock. Blumbard had surrendered the key to us after a trooper had handed him the search warrant. A soldier named Sweeney checked the door frame for traps and opened the door.

We crowded inside and stood there silently. The interior was a greenhouse filled with lush marijuana plants. It was hot and humid and rank with the smell. And it was brighter than daylight with a dozen or more huge floodlights hanging from the ceiling like small suns.

"Kill some of those lights," the sergeant ordered, "and get that window open."

The plants were growing in long tin trays placed on low wooden tables. They were all at least five feet high, with rich, glossy leaves. There was a tangle of garden hoses and sacks of

what must have been a plant nutrient. Along one wall were two hundred or more seedlings growing in old washtubs. A pile of dried stalks was in a corner; the leaves must have been harvested every week or so this summer.

Beside me the sarge cleared his throat. "Sweeney, get the camera. The major won't believe this."

For the next two hours there was considerable traffic in and around the barn and farm. The county sheriff came over from Elizabethtown. A BCI officer came over from Ray Brook. A Channel Five news team shot a lot of tape. An FBI agent and a DEA man from Plattsburgh dropped in. We all had the same thought: a little cottage industry was getting much more sophisticated.

Finally the sergeant said, "All right. Party's over. Pull 'em up, and we'll take 'em away."

"Wait," I said. "Count the plants first. The mature ones." The law up here says the county can confiscate the property of anyone caught growing more than one hundred pot plants.

He looked at me. "Some reason, pop?"

"Just do it, all right?"

He went down one side, and I took the other. We met in the center.

"I make it a hundred and sixty-four," I said.

"That's what I got," the sarge said. "You happy now, pop?"

"Yes, thanks."

He turned away. I let him take three or four steps.

"Sergeant!"

He looked back, surprised.

"It's Deputy Sessions when you speak to me. You copy?"

"Yes, sir."

Age, like rank, hath its privileges. I went out to catch a ride home.

Jiggs Blumbard had enjoyed all the attention and excitement this morning. But when he realized he was being arrested on felony charges, he named his brother-in-law as chief gardener.

It was the brother-in-law who had been afraid that high consumption of electricity by a tiny farmhouse would attract attention. It was the brother-in-law who had assured Jiggs that the strange plants in the barn were sugar cane. His only job, Jiggs insisted, was to keep the generator fueled.

With Jiggs Blumbard in jail, maybe I could do something about getting his son back in school. With a parent like that the boy would need all the education he could get.

Two days later I was on my porch after lunch. It was another

er hot day; chores could wait until the sun eased off. I had been on the phone with the sergeant in charge of that Guard detail; his name was Matt Bennett.

We've talked a couple of times since our raid on the barn. He called to tell me that Blumbard's brother-in-law was in custody.

Along with a vanload of marijuana leaves and buds ready for market.

"Fifty pounds or more," Matt said. "Worth about a hundred thousand on the street."

"A Class C felony," I said, "good for fifteen years even without intent to sell."

Matt and I have a ten dollar bet on the outcome of the case. He thinks a smart defense lawyer will claim that our heli-

copter reconnaissance was an invasion of privacy and have our search warrant thrown out. I'm betting that doesn't happen, but I've been wrong before.

I was thinking of taking a nap when Leon phoned. "Here's a new scheme, Uncle Hank; it's a small ad in the paper. It says: 'Be a farmer. We will lease you a square yard of ground. Plant anything you want to! We do the watering and keep the deer away. Free use of tools, and no questions asked. When your friends ask, you can say you grow your own.'"

"There's a phone number. You want to check it out with us, Uncle Hank?"

"No, Leon," I said. "You boys handle it. I'll wait for the next one."

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

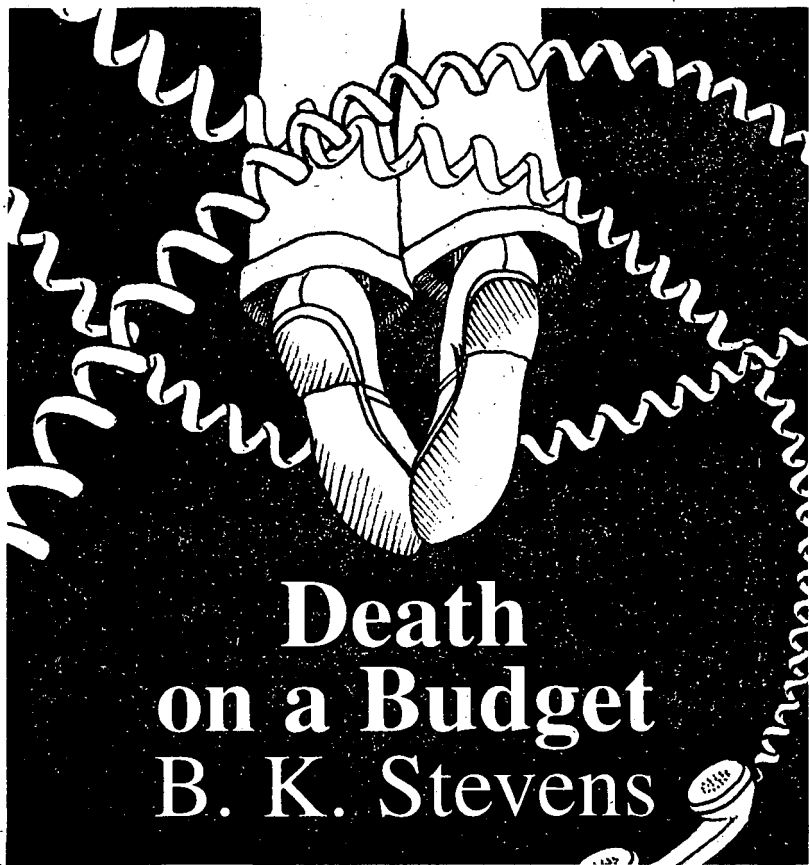


Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

"This fertilizer produces large flowers, strong stems . . ." We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.



# Death on a Budget

B. K. Stevens

**I**f you're sure it's what you want," he said. "We don't absolutely need the money. We could make do."

She stood on tiptoe to kiss his forehead. "We absolutely need the money," she said. "We *couldn't* make do. Besides, even if we didn't, even if we could, I'd want

to. This is my work, Sam. It's important to me."

"And to me. But that place, Leah! Why that place?"

"Because it's a place. And I have to learn about as many places as I can. That's the whole idea." She picked up her purse and checked for her keys. "You can handle the kids?"

He shrugged. "What's to handle? I get Sarah and Rachel up from their naps at three thirty, I make them snacks and watch *Barney* and *Wishbone* with them and put the chicken in the oven at four forty-five. I make rice and salad, I feed the girls, I bathe them, I put them to bed, and then I don't have another single thing to do until eleven forty-five when I warm up the chicken and rice and wait for you to come home and eat them. As I said, what's to handle?"

She kissed him again, this time on the lips. "It's nice to be married to an organized man. Rats—where'd my notebook go?"

### *Monday, March 9*

Arrived at Budget Psychics at 2:20 P.M., went to manager's office. Bess Walker at her desk: mid-forties, thin, dress-for-success suit. Seemed mildly surprised when she saw my resume. "So you have an M.A. in communications," she said. "Why are you working as a temporary secretary?"

*Note: Leaving the Ph.D. off the resume was the right decision. The M.A. makes people suspicious enough.* "Oh, I haven't found a satisfactory teaching job," I said casually. "And my husband's an artist, so we can use any cash I bring in. And I do enjoy secretarial work, and my skills are quite good."

"Yes, I see that." She scanned my resume again. "Sixty-five words a minute—not that typing is the most important part of this job." She tapped the telephone on her desk. "This is the most important part. I need someone with smarts manning the phone lines. Maybe the communications will help. If it does, this could turn into a permanent job. Our receptionist's on maternity leave for six weeks, but I'm not all that eager to take her back. She's pleasant but not sharp. If you're sharper, I will make a switch. You don't mind the hours?"

"Not really," I said honestly—but I was shocked by her callous attitude toward her regular receptionist. Not a Nurturing Stabilizer, I decided. "Since my husband's self-employed, we can pretty much make our own hours. We can adjust things so I'll still get plenty of time with the children."

"Oh. Children." She pursed her lips. "I suppose some people have to have them. Now, your most important duty is routing calls from clients. You work Prime Shift—3 P.M. until midnight. That's when we get most of our calls. Other times we make do with no receptionist and one or two psychics; during Prime, we have five psychics on call. Regular callers always get their regular psychic—that's



crucial. Our psychics work on commission—they get steamed if you give somebody else one of their regulars. As for new callers, refer to these notes.”

I took the typed sheet from her. “‘Kids and flakes get routed to Phoebe,’” I read out loud.

“Right—because Phoebe is a kid and a flake herself. She relates well to crazies. If you sense callers are on drugs, route them to Phoebe right away—in those situations she *really* relates. Ditzzy old ladies get routed to Harvey. He makes a big impression on them; God knows he can’t impress anyone else. Don’t throw other clients away on him. Vince specializes in financial advice, but he’s good at everything—he’s our top psychic. Sean is first-rate, too, especially with people searching for spiritual guidance, the meaning of life, crap like that. And Delia’s a solid, all-around little psychic. If Vince and Sean are tied up, route new callers to her unless they’re flakes or old ladies. Got that?”

“I think so.” A Task-Oriented Designator, I decided—that described Bess best. “What are my other duties?”

“You have some custodial chores. And you enter data from these forms into the computer.” She handed me a stack of printed sheets. “Our psychics fill one out every time they get a call.

We need these facts on file in case someone calls when his or her regular psychic isn’t in. There are spaces for identifying information—name, age, astrological sign—plus headings for data about Love, Money, Past Lives, Angel Guardians, Alien Encounters. All the standard stuff. This way our psychics can punch up data about anyone who’s called in before. They can’t enter info into the computer, though. Only you and I have the codes to do that. I used to give the psychics access, but they were always typing in false stuff, sabotaging each other’s files.”

My eyes probably got wide at that. “Sabotaging?”

“Oh, yeah.” Her voice was matter-of-fact. “They compete for clients. And we *are* Budget Psychics; we charge a fraction of what the major hotlines charge, so we have to keep our overhead low. Advertising, for example. We have a 900 number, of course, but we don’t try for a national clientele. We stick to ads in Personals columns just in the tri-state area—a lot of our calls come from right in town. No infomercials, no celebrity spokespeople. And no deadwood. If psychics can’t meet their quota, they’re out. Well. Ready for the Prime Shift staff meeting?”

All five Prime Shift psychics

were already crowded into the small break room. I smiled warmly—to succeed as a secretary, I've learned, one must be a Bridging Nurturer—and found a seat.

"Well," Bess said, not bothering to look up, "I've got last week's totals, and they're not great. Too many psychics sitting around during Prime with too few callers, and that increases overhead. So either you prolong calls and drive up call-backs, or we'll downsize. The end-of-month totals will decide it."

"But we work on commission," a twentyish woman in a long paisley skirt and floppy peasant blouse protested. Phoebe, I guessed. She drew a very long, very thickly fringed shawl more snugly around her shoulders and blinked vacantly. "So even if we don't get calls every minute, how does that cost you?"

Bess gave her a slow, bored look. "You still go to the bathroom," she said. "Every time you flush, it costs me. Anyway, Grace has an offer from Psychics-To-Go. If she leaves, I may move someone to Day Shift to replace her."

"But nobody calls six to four," a balding, plump man objected. "You can't make a decent living on Day Shift."

"You can't make a decent living on Prime Shift, Harvey," Bess said dryly. "I don't see why

it'd make much difference to you. Now then. Vince, you get First Graveyard. All right?"

"Fine," Vince said, smiling. He was about fifty, dressed in a red silk shirt and sparkling white slacks. "I enjoy First Graveyard. Plenty of loonies are still awake midnight to three."

"Show some respect, Vince," a fortyish man said, frowning. He wore a buckskin jacket and jeans; his long hair was pulled back in a ponytail. "Maybe this is all a joke to you, but it's not a joke to *them*. Or to *me*. I don't consider them loonies."

"Vince doesn't either, Sean," the young woman next to him said. It had to be Delia. She was delicately lovely and wore a trim pale blue suit and was obviously a Negotiative Clarifier. "That was just a figure of speech—right, Vince?"

Vince shrugged and grinned. "Whatever," he said.

"Anyway," Bess said, "Harvey gets Second Graveyard."

"Again?" The soft, balding man looked down at his hands. "I mean, 3 to 6—it's the very worst shift, I'm lucky if I get even a single call. And you put me on that shift so often, and I *do* have a day job, and if I'm not alert for it—"

"How alert do you have to be to bag groceries?" Bess put down her clipboard and took off her glasses. "Somebody has to take

Second Graveyard, and I won't waste Vince or Sean or Delia on a no-call shift. They consistently average above fifteen minutes a call—your average is six and a half. It makes *sense* for you to take the bad shifts. But if you won't cooperate—"

"No, no," Harvey said hastily. "I'll take the shift."

"Fine." Bess stood up. "The meeting's over. Vince gets the main office, and Sean and Delia get the small offices as usual. Harvey and Phoebe take the cubicles outside the reception area. . . . Oh yes. This is Leah Abrams. She's filling in for Elaine. Leah, make sure everyone has a full water pitcher. Then I'll show you how to work the phones."

8:45 P.M. I'm in the break room eating the fruit Sam packed for me, and this is my first chance to take notes since the staff meeting. It's been a fascinating first few hours on the job. I've gained several insights, and I've faced—satisfactorily, I hope—my first communicative and ethical dilemmas. Around 5:30 I took a call from a woman who sounded very distressed.

"This is Emma," she said. "I usually talk to Vince, but I need to talk to a woman this time."

I punched Emma up on my computer and saw she'd been calling Vince every night for

three months. I remembered what Bess had said about routing regular callers to their regular psychics and hesitated. I glanced at the row of red lights near my phone that told me which psychics were free. "Are you sure?" I said. "Vince doesn't have a caller at the moment. Perhaps—"

"No," Emma cut in. "Vince has helped me so much—so *much*—but I really need to talk to a woman. Please?"

"Of course." Delia and Phoebe were both free. Since Emma didn't sound like a kid or a flake, I connected her to Delia.

A few minutes later Vince strolled into the reception area. "Slow night," he commented and stretched his arms and settled into a chair next to my desk. He glanced at the row of red lights. "But both Sean and Delia have callers, I see."

Should I tell him about Emma? He might find it useful information, or it might just be a source of Conflict-Inducing Static. I thought quickly, then smiled. "That's right," I said.

"Well, they're both good." He picked up a magazine from my desk. "Delia's very smooth, very sound. She knows how to work a call. And Sean—well, Sean is Sean. He was a monk once."

My first response, I admit, was sexist and ethnocentric—

how could such a goodlooking man have been a monk?

"Really?"

"Oh yes," Vince said. "Then he went to India and attached himself to a guru, then lived with some aborigines in Australia, and then at various points—I can't recall the sequence—became involved in transcendental meditation, acupuncture, spirit channeling, all-bran diets, things of that sort. Then he became a psychic—or discovered he was a psychic, whichever you prefer—and had a lucrative practice on the West Coast, wrote a book that sold well. You may have heard of it—*Spirit Pure, Path Sure?*"

"I have," I said, impressed. "How did he end up here?"

Vince shrugged. "Sean says he chose to end up here. He was channeling the spirit of a Mongol warrior for the benefit of a Fortune 500 CEO and had a vision saying his true mission was to bring psychic comfort to the masses. So he wandered the highways and byways, seeking a way to share his gifts, and found Budget Psychics." Vince raised an eyebrow. "Either that or he messed up somehow and had to take any job he could get. Personally, I think everyone who works for Budget Psychics messed up somehow."

Was this an invitation to Intimacy Building? I decided it was.

"Did *you*—well, mess up somehow?" I asked.

Vince smiled broadly. "Indeed I did. I was a professor of psychology at a rather fine women's college. It enrolled many rather fine women. I got along with them extremely well. Then one of them went to a consciousness-raising workshop and decided I'd gotten along with her *too* well, and, well, here I am. Not that I mind. Teaching bored me, my training as a psychologist makes me adept at sensing what our pathetic callers want to hear, and every job has its perks. Now, my dear. Tell me about *you*. That ring tells me you're married. Not happily, I hope?"

"Very happily." My tone stiffened even though I'd been determined to achieve Total Receptivity. I was relieved when the hotline rang, and a new caller said she needed financial advice. "I'll connect you with Vince," I said, waving him to his office.

As soon as he was gone, Harvey slunk over to my desk. The poor thing—three of his regulars had phoned in tonight, but none of the calls lasted long, and that wouldn't do him much good in an office that made its profits by charging by the minute. He gestured apologetically. "Might I disturb you, Leah?"

"Of course." I smiled, trying to

radiate Maximum Warmth and Reassurance. "How may I help you, Harvey?"

He sat down. "I've been listening to you handle calls—I haven't had much else to do—and you seem very articulate. So perhaps you'd draft a note for me. I'd meant to bring it up at the meeting, but considering Bess's remarks, and her insinuation that I wasn't cooperative, and—and in short, I was afraid. I didn't dare speak, but I'd like to leave her a note. Could you help?"

"Of course." Classic, I thought. Bess's excessive Task Orientation—surprising, considering her gender—had lowered her Nurturance Quotient so much that workers feared to make basic Needs Clarification. Well, this was a chance to demonstrate the contribution a Bridging Nurturer could make. I pulled over a legal pad. "What would you like to communicate to Bess?"

"Well, I'd—that is, I'm grateful to work Prime Shift, I'd never want to give that up—but Thursday's my fortieth anniversary, and I'd like a little time off—6 to 8, say—so I can take my wife out to dinner. I wouldn't ask, except these last years have been so hard on Mary, on both of us."

I took notes, then paused—sensitively, I hoped. "Problems

in the marriage, Harvey?" I asked gently.

"Oh no," he said. "Mary's wonderful—she's suffered so, with never a complaint. But things have been so difficult. Our daughter—our only child, Sharon, the sweetest girl—hit by a drunk driver on her eighteenth birthday, in a coma ever since, and that private hospital costs so much! Mary works at a shoe factory so we won't have to send Sharon to a state institution, and we managed as long as I had my little tearoom and my dear ladies came for their readings. But most of my dear ladies have passed on, I've lost my little tearoom, and Mary stitches soles all day, and I bag groceries at KostKutters and answer phones here, and still the bills aren't paid, and—well, I'd like to take Mary to dinner on our anniversary, but I don't know how to ask for time off without sounding uncooperative. Can you help?"

If I can't help with *this*, I thought, I'll ask the university to cancel my degrees. "I will," I said—and when the next call came in, even though it was from a young flake on drugs, I routed it to Harvey. Phoebe needed the minutes, too, but all I could think about was a young woman in a coma, and a timid, faithful father, and a fading mother stitching wearily.

Phoebe herself wandered over to my desk not long after.

"Hey, Lisa," she said, smiling drowsily, "you got aspirin, anything like that? I've got a bitch of a headache."

"I'll see if Elaine has something." I checked the drawers and rummaged through the decorative clutter on the reception desk—framed photos, scented candles, tiny ceramic puppies and kittens—until I found a bottle. "Tylenol—will that do?"

"Groovy." She took the bottle and shook half a dozen pills into her hand. "So, Lisa. How do you like the job so far?"

"It's Leah," I said, "and I like it fine. Do *you* like it?"

"Pretty much." Her fringed shawl had drooped off her shoulders and was trailing on the floor. She scooped it up clumsily and slung it around her neck. "Harvey's nice, and Delia's cool, and Vince—oops. Your phone's ringing, Mia."

I answered it. "I need to talk to Sean," a carefully resonant male voice said. "This is Ethan Lawrence."

It couldn't possibly be *the* Ethan Lawrence. I checked my row of red lights. For almost the first time all evening Sean was free.

"I'll connect you right away, Mr. Lawrence," I said.

Phoebe picked up at that. "Ethan Lawrence? *Again?* Wow."

I stared at her. "You don't mean it's *the*—"

She nodded. "*The*. The movie star, the producer, the incredible stud. I've talked to him myself a few times, when Sean was busy. Ethan *worships* Sean. See, a bunch of years ago, Ethan got messed up—it was after his third divorce, and he got *really* heavy into drugs and booze, and he couldn't get roles, and he was broke and fat and all. You probably read about it."

"I think so," I said, hating to admit I read such stuff.

"That was when Sean was out West," she continued. "He met Ethan and became his personal spiritual trainer. He got him into bran and sit-ups, put him in touch with his angel guardian, helped him work through a conflict he'd had with his father in a past life. Ethan slimmed down *fast*, won an Oscar, and started a production company. Now he wants Sean to work for him, start a new psychic network, but Sean always says no, he's happy here. Geez! I mean, here's okay, but give *me* a chance to work for Ethan, and see what *I'd* do." She glanced at my row of lights. "Good; Vince is free. I gotta talk to him. See you, Melissa."

That was my last significant communicative exchange. By 7, the calls were coming in more frequently, and most of the psychics were busy most of the

time. I was relieved when Bess came by my desk at 8:30 and told me to take a break, and—

11:07 P.M. My shift ends soon. I've had two more exchanges, and I want to get down some notes while the details are fresh. Just as I was finishing up my notes about Phoebe, Sean came into the break room to refill his water pitcher.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, standing up. "I was supposed to refill the pitchers at 8, but I forgot."

He smiled, beautifully. "I don't mind doing it, and I don't like the way Bess turns secretaries into maids. She's too cheap to hire a janitor, so she makes you vacuum and empty trash and—"

"Oh, it doesn't bother me at all," I said eagerly, honestly. "All labor has dignity, don't you think?"

He beamed.

"Absolutely. I *knew* you were a compatible spirit. So, Leah Abrams. Jewish?"

Sean, I thought. No. No way. "That's right," I said.

He nodded and sat down at the table. "I was a Jew once," he said. "Well, almost. After I returned from Australia, I met an amazing Hasidic rabbi, and I studied with him for more than a year. But when I was almost ready to convert, I discovered Native American spirituality.

Reb Moshe wouldn't let me keep my totems in the synagogue. He was a dear, learned man but narrow. So I left. I traveled to the Dakotas and—oh, hello, Delia."

She smiled at us as she got her carton of yogurt from the refrigerator. "It's a busy night. Any special calls?"

Sean shrugged. "Every call is special."

"Yes, of course." She licked a fragment-of-an-ounce of yogurt from her spoon. "I had a splendid talk with one of my regulars. It was so exciting. We're very close to accessing the spirit of her deceased dachshund. So, Leah, tell us about yourself. You're wearing a wedding ring—do you have children?"

We chatted for several minutes, and I showed them pictures of Sarah and Rachel; then Bess strode into the break room. She was about to leave, she said, and wanted to know why the water pitchers weren't refilled. Sean and Delia were still talking busily when I left. Well, I thought. That's a definite Duad.

Of course Sam was in his attic studio when she returned. Leah stepped over the mounds of rosewood shavings and tapped him on the shoulder. "I'm back," she said.

He turned around and kissed



her gratefully. "At last. I hate these hours. So? How was it?"

"Revealing." She leaned over to examine the flamingos. "Sam, they're lovely. I know this isn't what you want to do—you're a true artist, you should be free to do your own work, you shouldn't have to carve custom-made lawn ornaments just so we can make our mortgage payments—but even so, these are lovely. The tall one seems to be laughing. It's Sarah's laugh, isn't it?"

He peered at it. "I guess it is. What do you know. The girls were playing up here while I was carving the face, and they were both laughing—I must've absorbed the expression."

She gazed at the shorter flamingo. "And this one—oh, Sam! It looks so despondent. Just *look* at how its neck droops, how limp its wings are. Were you alone when you carved it?"

"I was. I was thinking about all I'd hoped to achieve as an artist, I was despondent, and I guess that came through in the sculpture. It makes an interesting grouping, don't you think? The Rutherfords should be pleased. And it confirms what I've said before. Whether they mean to or not, artists can't help putting their signatures on their works. Well. The chicken and rice should be hot by now. Tell me about your day. Did it support your theories?"

"Sort of. Delia has potential as a Transcendent Nurturer—she communicates well with everyone and resolves conflicts—but the office power structure keeps her from true Bridging. And I've identified two Duads, but there must be more—there always are. Well, it's only my first day. Tomorrow I'll learn more."

"Of course you will," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "And in the meantime you'll eat."

### *Tuesday, March 10*

This is very upsetting. It's 7:50 P.M., and I'm in the break room waiting for the police. I hope I can get a few pages of coherent notes down before they get here.

I arrived at 2:45. Bess told me to empty the trash in all the offices, so I got the plastic liners from the break room cupboard and made my rounds. I should mention one potentially significant wastebasket here, the one in the main office, the office that Vince always claims, the office all the psychics use when they are are manning a graveyard shift. Two empty bottles were in that basket—a Windex bottle and a Jim Beam bottle.

Well, I thought. Someone's drinking on the job. I was sure that wasn't kosher but didn't think it was my place to say anything. So I cinched up the

liner and carried it to the dumpster with all the others. Now, I wonder if that was a mistake.

By the time I got back, psychics were gathering for the daily Prime Shift meeting—Phoebe, Sean, Delia, Harvey. No Vince. Bess paced fretfully until 3:15, then got started. “Well,” she said, “Vince seems to be late. Again. And I see that last night the answering machine for the hotline was turned on from 2:15 to 2:55. Any comments, Harvey?”

Harvey blinked nervously. “I arrived for Second Graveyard at 2:55 and found the office empty, the machine on. But I’m sure Vince had a good reason for leaving early.”

“I’m sure he did,” snapped Bess. “So don’t simper and imply he didn’t. We’ll cover for him until he arrives. Delia, you’ve got First Graveyard tonight; Harvey, you’ve got Second. Any complaints about *that*? Then get to work.”

We all took our places, but the atmosphere was hardly conducive to Maximum Harmonious Output. Everyone seemed uneasy. After barely fifteen minutes Phoebe came to my desk. “You got more Tylenol?” she asked. “I’ve got a *super* bitch of a headache.” She lowered her voice. “And Bess is *super* pissed. I can tell; I’m not psychic for nothing. Vince pulls stunts like

this all the time, but she never dares to say anything because he’s a part owner of Budget Psychics. He’s really her boss more than she’s his, so she has to take it no matter what he does. Oh man! Talk about bad vibes! I’m *super* tense.”

“I can imagine,” I said sympathetically, and then the phone rang. It was Emma, asking for Vince.

“I’m sorry, he’s not available.” I punched Emma up on the computer. That was right—she was Vince’s regular, but yesterday she’d called at 5:30 and asked to talk to a woman, and I’d connected her with Delia. “You could talk to Delia again.”

“No, that’s all right,” she said but sounded anxious. “I’ll call back.” She hung up.

I skimmed the data I’d typed into the computer after her conversation with Delia. Odd, I thought; she’d talked to Delia for thirty-seven minutes but Delia had written just two vague sentences on the form: “Emma needed advice about relationships. I counseled her to be trusting.” Puzzled, I picked up the three forms Vince had filled out during First Graveyard last night. Emma had called again, at 1:03 A.M. “I gave Emma advice about finances,” Vince had written, and that was it. Well, I thought. Delia and Vince might be skilled psychics,

but they weren't communicating fully. A few workshops might help.

It was a slow evening. Bess paced in the reception area a lot, glancing at her watch. At 7:30 she turned on me. "Do you *enjoy* just sitting there and twiddling your thumbs," she asked, "or would you like to *earn* your money? I can watch the phones—they're not ringing anyway. You can use this time to wash the windows. There's Windex in the supply closet."

"I'll be glad to, Bess," I said and walked quickly down the hall and pulled open the door of the supply closet.

It's bizarre, but the first thing I noticed was the puddle on the floor. There was nothing ominous about the puddle—it wasn't bloody, just clear water—but there was a lot of it, and I took a step back to keep from getting my feet wet. And then I looked up and saw Vince hanging in midair, his eyes staring, his mouth gaping open, Phoebe's long, fringed shawl wound tightly around his neck, a chair kicked to the side. I screamed, and people came running, and now we're waiting for the police. God help us.

10:40. P.M. My first chance to take notes since the police came. It's been hard. Phoebe cried hysterically, Bess has seemed in

shock, Sean has been shaky—and the younger police officers have kept cracking jokes, finding it funny that a body went undiscovered for hours in a building packed with psychics. Thank goodness the detective, a middle-aged man named Brock, is more sensitive. And thank goodness for Delia, who has been comforting everybody. As for Harvey—well, I don't know what to make of *his* behavior.

I'd better explain. Bess and Harvey took poor Vince down, hoping there was a chance of reviving him, but he was stiff and cold. When Detective Brock arrived, he looked at Vince, looked at the shawl still hanging there. Vince must have opened the access panel in the closet's ceiling and tied one end of the shawl around a beam in the crawl-space. Detective Brock frowned.

"Can anyone identify that shawl?" he asked.

Phoebe burst into hysterics again, and Delia put an arm around her.

"It's Phoebe's," she said. "She must have left it here by accident. It was always drooping off her shoulders and falling on the floor, and Phoebe often forgets things. You left your purse in the office last week, didn't you, dear?"

Phoebe sobbed in agreement. "And my shoes," she said.

"Well, that could explain it,"

Brock agreed. "Now. Who was the last person to see the deceased alive?"

I cleared my throat. "It was probably me. I'm the temporary secretary. Vince was working First Graveyard—that is, he worked alone here from midnight until 3 A.M.—and before I left at midnight, I refilled his water pitcher." I shrugged helplessly. "He seemed fine—cheerful, friendly, fine."

"I see," Brock said, taking notes. "And who was the first person to arrive at the office this morning?"

Harvey stepped forward, not looking as nervous as I would have expected. "I was. I arrived at 2:55 A.M. to work Second Graveyard. Vince wasn't here. That surprised me, but I assumed he had some urgent reason for leaving his shift early."

Brock nodded. "Did you see anything else unusual?"

Harvey hesitated. "No. Not at all. I didn't see anything unusual. But I—I may have sensed something. I didn't mention it before because I wasn't sure, but now, well, perhaps it would help if we went to the office where Vince was working."

We trooped into the office. There wasn't much to see, just a small bookcase, a swivel chair, and a grey metal desk stocked with the usual necessities: telephone, answering machine,

computer, blank caller forms, water pitcher, glass, pencils, tarot cards, Ouija board. Everything looked normal and tidy—sparkling, even.

Harvey walked slowly toward the desk, closed his eyes, and pressed one hand against his forehead.

"When I came here this morning, I sensed a female presence. Not a woman who works here—an outsider. And I sensed—I sense even now—romance, liquor, a flickering flame. But I sense conflict, too, and heartbreak." He lifted his hands dramatically. "I sense—despair!"

"Interesting," Brock said dryly. "And you're sure you didn't see anything that helped you sense these things?"

Harvey opened his eyes.

"Why, no. The office looked perfectly normal to the physical eye. But to the spiritual eye—ahh! So much was revealed, and will yet be revealed."

"That's good to know." Brock looked him over. "Just share any revelations with me. You can all get back to work now, let my people do *their* work. They'll need some time in this office, undisturbed. Meanwhile, I'll talk to each of you privately."

He held the interviews in the break room. When he got to me, I told him about the bottles in the wastebasket. He asked if I knew of any tensions in the of-

fice, and I told him about yesterday's staff meeting, about what Bess said about downsizing. It can't be relevant—Vince was the top psychic and a part owner, so he can't have been worried about losing his job, that couldn't explain his suicide—but investigators need to consider all the data when they're interpreting a situation, so I didn't hold back. When we finished, Detective Brock thanked me and said we might talk again soon. I wonder what he meant.

Sam brought her a hot water bottle wrapped in a thick maroon towel. "Put this behind your back, Leah," he said. "You know how your spine always tenses up at times like these. And let me get you another glass of wine."

She sighed gratefully as he slid the hot water bottle into place but shook her head. "No more wine. I should go to bed."

"You can sleep until noon tomorrow," he said, taking her glass. "I think you need to unwind before you try to sleep."

"You're right," she admitted. "I *couldn't* sleep now. Poor Vince! I never guessed he was in such pain. I'm supposed to be an expert, but—damn! Who could be at the door at *this* hour?"

"I'll go see," Sam said. A moment later he returned with Detective Brock. Leah wadded up

her afghan in embarrassment and sat up straight on the sofa.

Brock, too, looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry to disturb you so late," he said, "but since your lights were on—"

"It's fine, detective," she said. "Please have a seat. You've met my husband, Sam Abrams? Well, How can I help you?"

He settled into the rocking chair Sam had carved when Sarah was born. "I want to know why you're working at Budget Psychics. Oh, I know about the regular secretary's maternity leave, I've talked to people at your temporary agency. But in my job you get a sense for people, and I've got a feeling something's going on. When I talked to you earlier—you were very helpful—I couldn't help feeling I was talking to a teacher. So. What gives?"

She glanced at Sam, and he nodded. All the data, she decided. Complete cooperation with a fellow investigator. "I *was* a teacher," she said. "A professor. I have a Ph.D. in communications. But I hated campus politics, I got tired of listening to students whine about grades, and I was wasting too much time in committee meetings and faculty meetings instead of getting *real* work done. I'm fascinated by communications in the workplace, but I think most studies are flawed because the

people being observed *know* they're being observed. So I quit my teaching job and registered with a temporary agency so I could observe a variety of work settings in a more natural way."

Brock nodded: "So you're working undercover."

She didn't like the term. "I'm writing a book—the tentative title is *A Hermeneutics of Workplace Communications: Duadic Networking and Transcendent Nurturization*."

"Wow," Brock said, impressed. "That's quite a title. And it's only tentative! What does it mean?"

She hesitated. "The theory is rather involved, but my thesis is that all workers want to do their best, to make the workplace a success and to enjoy meaningful relationships with their coworkers. If they have good communication and conflict resolution skills, workers realize that every situation is potentially win-win, that they can always find ways to cooperate rather than compete. But too often people pair off; they form Duadic Networks with one person with whom they communicate well, and they view other Duads as competitors. So every workplace needs Transcendent Nurturers to build communicative bridges between one Duad and another."

"Wow," Brock said again. "That's something. Of course, if

you'd asked *me*, I would've guessed some people are plain rotten no matter how well you communicate with them—the more you understand them, the more they make your skin crawl. I would've guessed there are always winners and losers, and some people just want to win and don't care who they hurt in the process. But I'm just a dumb cop. If I had a Ph.D., I'd probably understand these things better. Now, here's the other thing I want to talk to you about. Vince didn't commit suicide. He was murdered."

Leah sat forward. "Murdered? You're sure?"

"Positive," Brock said cheerfully. "The coroner says that shawl didn't kill him; he was strangled with something harder, like a telephone cord. He wasn't strung up until after he was dead. And he was hit in the head before he was killed—there's a bruise. I'm not telling anyone else at Budget Psychics this yet. I'm just telling you because you barely knew him and presumably didn't have any motive to kill him and because I like you. I'm grateful to you for telling me about the bottles in the wastebasket, and about the threat of downsizing—nobody else mentioned any of that. So. Any ideas about who killed him?"

She shook her head, dazed.

"I'm sorry, detective. I don't have any ideas at all. I can hardly believe he was murdered."

Brock stood up. "Well, think it over. And keep your eyes open, and let me know if you notice anything suspicious, okay?"

She shook his hand weakly. "Okay," she said.

*Wednesday, March 11*

9:25 P.M. My first break in over six hours, and I'm a wreck. I wouldn't have thought that any day in a workplace could be more stressful than yesterday, but today proved me wrong.

It started as soon as I arrived. Bess, her suit rumpled and her eyes dull, took me by the arm almost desperately. "The phones are ringing off the hook," she told me. "I don't know why the news that a psychic has committed suicide should make people call in, but it does. It'll be even worse during Prime. So I'll act as receptionist, and you fill in as a psychic."

"Me!" I said, startled. "But I'm not a psychic. I make no claim to extrasensory powers of any kind. I—"

"You'll do fine." She pulled me into the main office, the one where Vince had probably been murdered. "You've got an M.A. in communications. You should be able to lay on the bull with the best of them. Just tell people what they want to hear. If you

can add some mystical mumbo-jumbo, so much the better. Between calls, empty the wastebaskets. Damn—there's the phone." She ran off. Seconds later she connected me with a college student who wanted to know whether majoring in theater would guarantee her a brilliant Hollywood career. I struggled with my conscience, then resigned myself to listening to her and making sympathetic noises. In the end I advised her to get a broad foundation in the liberal arts regardless of her major and to make sure she had solid computer skills just in case. She was very grateful, impressed by my ability to see into the future.

There were other calls, constant calls. One from an elderly man who thought his garbage disposal was haunted caused me deep ethical anguish. But I postponed decisions about right and wrong until later. Then, around 6, I got a call from Emma. I checked the computer. Yes—she'd been one of Vince's regulars, she'd talked to Delia on Monday, she'd called back yesterday asking for Vince again. Now she needed my help.

"I need to find a lost object," Emma said, and I could tell she was near tears. "Can you tell me where it is?"

Oh great, I thought. Where do I start with something like this?



"Can you describe it?" I asked, stalling.

"Well, it's valuable," she said. "And it's small and round and—well, it's special, and if I can't find it, things could get bad. Can't you go into a trance and sense where it is?"

"I'm not all that good at trances," I admitted. "Can you remember the last time you saw this object?"

"Well, of course I can remember the last time I saw it," she snapped. "The point is, I can't see it *now*. But you don't even know what it is, do you? You can't even sense that much."

"No. If you'll tell me where you've been since you last saw it, and—"

"I shouldn't have to tell you all *that*," she said angrily. "What the hell kind of a psychic are you, anyhow?" She slammed the receiver down. I quickly scanned the records of her many conversations with Vince. Advice about her investments, her trips to Bermuda, her troubled marriage, her unfulfilled dreams. Three solid months of advice. Oddly, Vince's notes got less specific, not more specific, as time went on.

My phone rang again and again, and I got caught up in the work. Then, around 8, there was a long lull. I was about to risk a run to the ladies' room when the door opened.

It was Bess, followed by Harvey and Phoebe, followed by a camera crew, followed by Detective Brock and two uniformed officers. Sean and Delia were in the procession, too, but they hung back by the door, not stepping into the office.

"Get away from the phone, Leah," Bess said, fuming. "I've had to switch all the lines off. Harvey called the press and the police—without even *asking* me—and now he wants to have some sort of demonstration. Detective, can't you stop this?"

He shrugged. "I didn't invite the press, but I've got no right to keep them out. If *you* want to throw them out, go ahead."

She winced. "No. I have nothing—that is, we have nothing to hide. Harvey, try not to make *too* big a fool of yourself."

He waited until the cameras were on and the reporter had given her opening spiel, and then he went into a trance. He was dressed very spiffily—freshly pressed suit, crisp white shirt, broad red tie with an Aztec sun smack in the middle. He closed his eyes, pressed a hand to his head, staggered a bit, and spoke.

"It comes." He lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "The curtains of time draw aside, and it comes: A vision, revealed only to the spiritual eye. I sense a feminine presence in this room,

a stranger—beauty, intrigue, romance. I smell the heavy fragrance of liquor, and see a flickering flame. And I hear echoes of conflict, I feel heartbreak and despair!”

“You said all that yesterday.” Bess tried to sound bored.

Harvey opened his eyes long enough to glare at her, then closed them again. “There is more. Can you feel it? Can you feel *him*? Yes, Vince is still here, and still in pain. He’s trying to break through, to speak to me. Yes, Vince? What was that? You are sorry for giving way to despair? And you’re—could you repeat that, Vince? I didn’t quite catch it. You say you’re sorry for *her*, that it was your fault? And you want to bring her peace, to restore to her the precious thing she lost? All right, Vince. Tell me where this precious thing is so I can give it to her. No? Oh, I understand. You want to *show* it to me.”

He opened his eyes, gazed at the ceiling, and spun around slowly, three times; then he stretched out his arms and clapped his hands smartly, making a pointer of them. He walked forward heavily, zombielike, until he reached the small bookcase stocked with back issues of *Modern Psychic* and brought his hands down jerkily to point at the space between the bookcase and the wall. Dropping his arms

to his sides, he came out of his trance and wiped his forehead, exhausted. “There,” he said.

Brock picked it up with a handkerchief. It was a gold bracelet studded with rubies. The reporter scurried over to ask Harvey to explain this amazing demonstration of psychic ability. “I *can’t* explain it,” Harvey said, gazing modestly into the camera. “It’s a power beyond all of us. But the spirits have been generous to me, and I’m eager to share my gifts. Call Budget Psychics, 555-0101, and ask for Harvey. I also do private consulting work and assist at weddings, funerals, bar mitzvahs. And I hope soon to reopen my little tearoom, located at—”

“That’s enough,” Brock cut in. “Miss Johnson, I need that film. It’s possible evidence in a homicide. Now, clear the room.” He pointed at Harvey. “Not you, though. You stay.”

“That’s not fair,” Harvey protested. “That film *has* to go on the air. People must learn—did you say a homicide?”

“That’s what I said.” Brock looked grim. “Your friend was murdered. I’m going to give you one last chance to tell the truth about what happened last night, about what you saw and what you did, and then I’m taking you downtown and booking you.”

“But I did nothing last night!” Harvey said wildly. “I saw noth-

ing with the physical eye. Only through the spiritual—”

“Fine. I’ll read you your rights.” Brock took the rest of us in with a glance. “Clear out.”

We waited in the hall, and moments later poor Harvey was led out in handcuffs. Phoebe was in tears again. “Harvey never *did* like Vince,” she said, sobbing. “He didn’t understand him. And now he’s killed him!”

“Oh, shut up,” Bess snapped. “Harvey’s no killer.”

“That’s right.” Sean patted Phoebe’s shoulder. “Harvey didn’t approve of our late friend, but there’s no violence in his soul. Bess, let’s keep the lines closed down tonight. There’s such turmoil in this place; how can we give clear readings? We should go home out of respect for Harvey and the departed one.”

Bess looked tempted, but Delia stepped forward. “Vince would want us to keep going. Think of his regulars. They’re in special need—how will they feel if they get a recording? And there may be other special calls, Sean. We *need* to stay open.”

He looked at her hopelessly, then nodded. “All right.”

“Well, *you* can stay,” Bess said. “I’m going home to get drunk. Leah, take over the reception desk. Sean’s got First Graveyard, and Phoebe’s got Second.”

Sean shook his head. “I can’t.

I’m too overcome by grief.”

“I’ll take both Graveyards,” Phoebe said quietly, wiping her eyes. “I want to sit in the big office, to feel close to Vince.”

Bess shrugged and left. I’m connecting callers mechanically, jotting notes whenever I can, thinking of Harvey in jail, wondering how his wife will take his arrest, wondering what will happen to their daughter, trying to figure things out.

11:35 P.M. Half an hour ago Delia came into the reception area. “Don’t connect me to anyone for a while, Leah,” she said. “I’m too on edge. God! Maybe it *was* a mistake to stay.”

“Well, Bess pretty much said staying was optional,” I said. “I’m sure she’ll understand if you go home now.”

“Maybe soon.” She glanced at the row of red lights near my phone. “Sean has a caller, I see. One of his regulars?”

“It’s Ethan Lawrence,” I said, happy to have some harmless gossip to share. “They’ve been talking for almost an hour.”

“That’s nice.” She yawned. “When Sean finishes his call, tell him I want to talk to him.”

“Sure.” I hesitated, then went ahead. “Delia, I wanted to ask you about Emma—you talked to her on the night Vince died. Do you remember what you talked to her about?”

Her eyes narrowed. "I filled out a form about that call."

"Yes, I entered that in the computer. But you just said you counseled her about relationships. Do you remember more details?"

"The details," she said coldly, "are confidential. We're like priests or psychiatrists, Leah. Information that's useful to share goes on the forms. The rest we keep to ourselves."

"I respect that, but Emma called today, asking about a lost object, and I wondered if there might be some connection—"

"You've got no business speculating about our callers' private lives," Delia said sharply. "Just answer your damn phones, or I'll tell Bess you're asking about confidential matters."

"I'm sorry." I realized I'd made a communicative blunder. This was no time to try to initiate Professional Trust Sharing. Delia was too upset—we all were. When she left with Sean minutes later, she barely glanced at me. *Note: Add a chapter on Special Sensitivity Needs in Times of Workplace Crisis.*

"Leah, I think you're onto something," Sam said.

He stepped back, squinted at the base of the birdbath, and walked forward to sand it again. "I think you should tell Brock."

"But how would he react?" she

protested. "I think he'd overreact and arrest the wrong person just as he did tonight. How could anyone think Harvey's a murderer? He's so gentle!"

"Gentle people have been known to commit murder," Sam pointed out. "And Harvey *does* have a motive."

"Yes, I handed Brock his motive," Leah said bitterly. "I told him about Bess's talk of downsizing. That talk wouldn't scare Delia or Sean—Bess sees them as stars. Harvey and Phoebe were the ones in danger of getting cut. And Harvey couldn't pay his daughter's hospital bills if he got fired, so if he could save his job by killing a rival—but Harvey wouldn't *do* that."

"Maybe not." Sam stepped back from the birdbath again, surveying it with real satisfaction this time. "That should hold water. So what do you plan to do?"

"I'm not sure," she said slowly. Water, she thought. What should I be remembering about water?

*Thursday, March 12*

Arrived at the jail at 11:45 A.M. While I was waiting to be searched, Detective Brock came out of the visiting area.

"You here to see Harvey?" he asked. "Research for the book?"

"No, just a visit to cheer him up," I said. "Detective, you *must*

be wrong about Harvey. He *can't* be the killer."

Brock shrugged. "If he'd tell us the truth—but he's lying through his teeth. Spirits didn't guide him to that bracelet. My people searched that office the day after the murder. We've got a photo of that exact spot between the wall and the bookcase. No bracelet. So how did it show up there later?"

"Harvey may have planted it," I admitted. "But not because he's a killer. He just wanted to score points as a psychic."

"Maybe. But he knew too much about the night of the murder, and don't tell me he learned it in a trance. He says he senses a feminine presence in the room, and sure enough, the coroner says Vince had sex shortly before he died. Harvey says he senses liquor, and the coroner says Vince's blood-alcohol content was sky-high—not to mention the bourbon bottle in the wastebasket, which Harvey claims he never noticed. Harvey says he never glanced at the wastebasket, but there was a burned-out match there, too—fits with what he said about the 'flickering flame,' doesn't it? Then there's the empty Windex bottle."

"The Windex bottle? *That* can't be incriminating."

"It can if it indicates someone attempted to clean up evidence.

That office was spotless, every surface polished and fresh-smelling. A few fingerprints from Harvey and the Day Shift psychic, but not a single print from Vince, even though he'd spent hours there the night before. There's no janitor, you didn't clean the office—so who did, and what was he hiding?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling defeated.

Brock sighed. "I'll tell you how it looks. The coroner says Vince died around 2 A.M. So I figure Harvey got back to the office earlier than he says, maybe found Vince with a woman. That'd make Harvey mad—he's a straitlaced guy. So after the woman left, he and Vince got into a fight. Vince was drunk so Harvey won, and he strangled Vince with the telephone cord. Then he panicked, strung Vince up in the closet to make it look like suicide, went nuts with the Windex to cover up any trace of what he'd done. Later, when we seemed to buy the suicide bit, he figured he'd fake a trance on TV, become a famous psychic."

"Doesn't *anything* point in another direction?"

He pursed his lips as if trying to decide whether to tell me. "There was a phone call at 1:40 A.M.—not on the hotline, on the regular office phone. It came from a pay phone a few blocks away. Harvey claims he's not

the one who called, but he could be lying, or the call could be insignificant. Mrs. Abrams, I like Harvey, too, but things look bad for him. If you can get him to open up to us, you'll be doing him a favor. You gonna try?"

"I will," I said, determined, and didn't flinch once as the matron searched me.

Harvey looked pathetic sitting behind the plate glass wall and dressed in an absurd orange jumpsuit, his face drawn. I smiled and picked up a phone.

"Hello, Harvey," I said. "How are you doing?"

"All right." He wiped his brow. "But my wife—she was here, she was weeping. I never meant to—oh, my poor wife!"

"You love her very much, don't you?" I asked gently. "Today is your fortieth anniversary—that must make everything harder. Have you bought her a gift?"

He blanched. "A gift? Well, no. That is, we don't have money to spare, and she understands; she wouldn't expect—"

"But it would be wonderful to surprise her," I said, "to give her something to brighten all her years of sacrifice. Let's see, the fortieth anniversary is rubies. Wouldn't it be wonderful to give her a ruby ring—or bracelet?"

He looked down at his hands. "I'm not a thief, Leah."

"Of course not," I agreed. "But with a fortieth anniversary com-

ing up, and with all your poor wife has been through—well, if you were cleaning the office during Second Graveyard and you saw a ruby bracelet and knew that the woman who must've dropped it had no business being there and would probably never dare ask about it, I can see how you'd be tempted."

"She was a slut," he burst out. "One of Vince's many sluts. He preyed on women—he even took advantage of little Phoebe—I found out about it—and these sluts! He'd seduce them over the phone when they called for guidance, he'd lure them to the office when he had a Graveyard Shift, and they'd carry on disgracefully! And this slut owned a precious thing—she must be rich—but she cared so little for it that she left it behind! Why should a woman like *that* have everything and my poor wife have nothing?"

"It isn't fair." I nodded sympathetically. "But your wife *does* have something—she has a loving husband, and I'm sure all she cares about is getting him home. Tell me the truth, Harvey. Then I'll help you tell the police, and we'll get you out of here. Was the woman still there when you got to the office?"

His face went hard, and then he sighed and his shoulders drooped. "No. The office was empty. The answering machine

was switched on, and the desk was *filthy* and *sticky*, spilled liquor, I'm sure, and in the middle were a Windex bottle and a scented candle from Elaine's desk—your desk, that is. It was burning. Burning! Who'd leave a candle burning in an empty building?"

I nodded. "That must have made you mad."

"It made me *furious*," he said. "I knew what had happened—Vince had a slut up there, they had a romantic evening, and he hadn't bothered to clean up. I went to the break room to refill the water pitcher—it was *empty*, he hadn't had the decency to refill it for me—and found two glasses in the sink. Did I need more proof of what he'd been doing? So when I went back to the office, I looked in the desk drawers, and there was a bottle of Jim Beam, half full. I emptied it and left it in the wastebasket, hoping Bess would see it and at least reprimand Vince. I didn't dare complain about him—he was a part owner—but she doesn't allow drinking on the job, and he *deserved* a reprimand."

I nodded, surprised at how completely Harvey was caught up in the emotions of that night. He now knew that Vince had been murdered but was still offended that he hadn't refilled the water pitcher. "And then you cleaned up the office?"

"Of course. I can't work in a *sty*, and the Windex was right there, and I had time; no one calls during Second Graveyard. So I put the candle back where it belonged, and when I was cleaning under the desk, I saw the bracelet, and, well, I took it. After Vince's body was found, and I thought he'd committed suicide, I decided to put it back and try—oh dear." He sighed. "I just wanted to give my poor wife an anniversary present and get my little tearoom back. Is that so terrible?"

"I don't think it's so terrible, Harvey," I said. "And Detective Brock won't think so, either. Let's go talk to him."

1:05 P.M. I'm at McDonald's, grabbing a quick lunch before heading to Budget Psychics—I want to get there early. The session with Detective Brock went well. I think Brock believed Harvey, but he hasn't released him. There's too much evidence pointing to him, Brock says. Well, I'll see if I can't find evidence pointing to someone else. I think I have a pretty good idea of what happened, but I need proof. No time to take more notes—I have to stop at the library on my way to work.

Midnight. I'm alone in the office, working First Graveyard. Bess has pressed me into ser-



vice as a psychic again—she's very shorthanded with both Vince and Harvey gone. I think the day has gone well. The next few hours will show if I'm right.

I got to Budget Psychics at 2:30 P.M. The Day Shift psychics were frantically trying to keep up with the unusual volume of calls, so I had no trouble doing the things I needed to do. By 3, Bess, Delia, Sean, and Phoebe had all arrived, and Bess called everyone into the break room for the staff meeting. She frowned at the scented candle in the middle of the table. "What the hell is *that* doing here?" she demanded.

"It's Elaine's," I said, looking confused. "I noticed it on the reception desk. But I don't know how it got in here."

"Well, as soon as the meeting's over, get it out of here," Bess said. "Now, Vince's funeral is at 11 tomorrow morning, and I want you all there. There'll probably be press, so—"

"What's that smell?" Phoebe cut in.

Delia sniffed, tentatively. "I don't smell anything."

Bess gave them an exasperated look, then sniffed just once, expertly. "Bourbon. Damn! Who has been drinking on the job?"

Sean shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Delia looked at him anxiously, then spoke. "It obviously isn't one of us, Bess. We

just got here. It must be a Day Shift psychic."

"Carol, probably," Bess said, her anger building. "I never liked that broad. Well, I won't sit here inhaling that junk. Phoebe, get some air freshener from the supply closet."

Phoebe scurried off obediently, and Bess got back to business. Moments later she was interrupted by a scream, a sharp, terrified scream, coming from the hall. We all ran out and saw Phoebe huddled against the wall, shrinking back from the open door of the supply closet. "Look!" she gasped. "Look!"

Delia stepped forward to look. "It's just a telephone cord, Phoebe," she said easily. "Did you think it was a snake?"

"But it's *hanging!*" Phoebe cried. "It's hanging right where *Vince* was hanging!"

This time Bess looked. "Damn!" she said. "Who'd pull a stupid practical joke like this?"

Delia shrugged reluctantly. "If Carol *has* been drinking—"

Bess turned on Phoebe. "Or maybe *you* set this up. You were here last night, for both Graveyards, and you probably got high. You *do* get high sometimes when you work Graveyards, don't you?"

"I took a few pills," Phoebe admitted. "I got a *little* high. But I didn't do *this*."

"You were probably so high

you don't remember *what* you did," Bess said. "Well, no more Graveyards until you straighten out. Sean, you take First to-night. Delia, you take Second."

Sean shook his head. "No. I have—well, I have a date."

"Cancel it," Bess said angrily. "Damn it, Sean, I can't ask Delia to work both Graveyards, and I've got nobody else."

"I'll work First Graveyard," I said quietly. "I'd like to."

They all looked at me in surprise, and Bess frowned. "You don't have enough experience. Delia could work First, and you could take Second. Nobody calls during Second anyhow."

"I'd *especially* like to work First," I tried to sound modest but confident. "As I was handling calls yesterday, I began to feel as if I might really *be* a psychic. I felt I was helping people—feeling things, seeing things. And last night I dreamed about Vince, and he *asked* me to work First Graveyard."

Bess smacked her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Oh Lord," she groaned. "Another nutcase. *Just* what I need."

"What if Leah's right, Bess?" Phoebe asked uneasily. "What if Vince does want her to work First Graveyard? It's the night before his funeral; his spirit may be restless. Maybe he wants to say something before he's buried, and he's chosen Leah—"

"Don't be silly," Delia said. "I'm sure Vince is at peace. And why would he choose Leah? He hardly knew her."

Bess held up a hand wearily. "Everybody shut up. Leah wants First Graveyard. She's got it. Maybe she'll do fine—nutcases sometimes make the best psychics. Delia, you've got Second, and I don't want to hear another word about it."

So that ended that. After Bess left around 10, I doubled as both receptionist and psychic, so I took the call from Ethan Lawrence when he called Sean from California and once more talked to him for over an hour. Minutes after that call ended, Mr. Lawrence called yet again, asking for Delia, and spoke to her for about fifteen minutes. By that time Prime Shift was almost over, and Phoebe wandered out into the reception area.

"You gonna work First Graveyard from here?" she asked.

"No." I stood up. "Vince told me to use his office. And he said he'd speak to me around 2—he said that's when he died."

"Wow." Phoebe said, impressed. "Say hi for me, okay? And say—well, say no hard feelings, rest in peace, all that."

"I'll be sure to tell him," I said and looked up as Sean and Delia came out of their offices. "Goodnight. If I make contact

with Vince, is there anything you'd like me to say?"

Séan shook his head uncomfortably. "Don't play games with this, Leah. If our departed friend is at peace, you shouldn't disturb him. And if he *isn't*—well, just leave him alone."

"He doesn't *want* me to leave him alone," I said. "That's why he came to me in my dream. And he told me to bring this." I took a small bottle of Jim Beam from my purse.

Delia snatched it. "So *you* were the one playing pranks today. What did you do—splash this around in the break room?"

"No," I said indignantly. "As you can see, the seal on the bottle isn't broken. Vince told me not to open it until 2 this morning." I snatched the bottle back, picked up the scented candle from the desk, and walked to Vince's office.

I heard them all leave. It's now 12:57 A.M.—a good time to jot down my theories about the murder. As I see it, on the night he died, Vince—oh, there's the phone.

I picked up the receiver. "Budget Psychics," I said cheerily. "What's your name? What's your sign? How may I help?"

"Delia?" It was a woman's voice on the other end of the line, slurred and heavy. "Is this Delia?"

She's drunk, I thought. "No, this is Leah. Who is this?"

"Emma." I heard ice cubes clinking in a glass. "I gotta talk to someone who can get me in touch with Vince."

It was the worst ethical dilemma yet, but I got through it. "Maybe I can help. Were you and Vince close?"

"Real close," Emma said, and sobbed. "A few nights ago, right about this time, we were real, *real* close."

"I sense that," I said, despising myself. "I sense the two of you in a small room. I feel very close to that room."

"Hell, you're *in* that room," Emma said, impressed. "You're good, Leah. What else do you sense?"

"Well, I sense love," I said, faltering. "And passion. And liquor. Jim Beam. But do I—yes, I sense a bit of distrust."

"You're right," Emma said, sobbing brokenly. "I'd told him stuff about my husband's business. I'd said my husband was planning to buy this company, and that morning my husband was upset because someone had bought up all this stock and now the deal would cost more. And I wondered if Vince had used what I'd told him and bought the stock himself. So I called and asked to talk to a woman, and Delia said not to worry and Vince truly loved me, and I

should see him that night and show my trust. So when my husband fell asleep, I called Vince on the hotline."

"I hear you calling," I said, wincing at my shamelessness. "I hear him telling you to come to him. And you *did* come to him. I can see you—you look so lovely, and you're wearing something beautiful. It's round, it glitters, it's red—is it a ring?"

"No, but you're close, Leah. *Damn*, you're good. It's a ruby bracelet my husband gave me, and it cost a ton. And I'm upset because—well, Vince and I had a great time, we made love and got so drunk. But the phone rang—not the hotline, the regular phone—and Vince answered it, and I was so plastered I could *not* stop laughing, but he got serious all of a sudden and told me to leave the room. And when I came back, he said I had to go away, someone was coming. So I left, but I hurried so much I lost my bracelet, and I didn't realize it until the next day. And now I've got to find it. My husband's suspicious—he's been going over our phone bills and reading newspaper stories about Vince's death, and he's asking questions, and what if he asks where the bracelet is? I'll have no Vince, no husband, *nothing*. Can you tell me where the bracelet is? Please?"

I made my voice ominous. "I

see it—it's in a little box, in a big building, guarded by people in uniform. Is it in a bank? No, it's—I'm sorry, Emma. It's in a police station."

"Oh God," Emma sobbed. "I was afraid of that. The police found it, didn't they, when they arrested that little bald psychic? Is *he* the one who killed Vince? Because of me?"

"No," I said, trying to sound entranced. "But the police think the little bald man killed him, and they plan to use the bracelet as evidence, and then your husband will know everything. Stop them, Emma. Save yourself, and save the little bald man. Tell the police everything. Then they'll know the bracelet had nothing to do with the murder, and they'll give it back to you."

"Will they really? They'll give it back to me?"

"I'm sure they will." Of course they will, I thought—after they have used it to convict Vince's killer, and after your husband knows all about your affair. "Call the police and talk to—is it Bock? Rock? No—it's Brock. You must call Brock tonight."

"I can't," Emma said, sobbing again. "I'm too afraid. Can you call him, Leah? Have him call me—Emma Whitley, 555-9392."

"I will," I said, jotting down the number. "I'll call Brock, and he'll call you, and soon you'll feel

better." I put the receiver down, picked it up again, and was about to dial when I felt—genuinely this time—a cold presence. I turned around and saw Delia standing in the doorway.

"My God," she said. "What are you about to do? Give a policeman a client's name, get her implicated in a murder? Do you know what a breach of ethics that is?" She strode to the desk. "Give me that name and number. I'll rip it up and take over the shift, and you can go home and pray I don't tell Bess."

I grabbed the paper away. "I *am* calling Detective Brock, and I *am not* going home. Emma's testimony can help clear Harvey—and I have to be here when Vince comes."

I lit the candle, ripped open the Jim Beam, and spilled some on the desk. "Come, wronged spirit," I intoned, closing my eyes, swaying in what I hoped was a mystical manner. "Come over water, come to the fire. It is cold in the land of the dead—warm yourself by this flame."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Delia said, her voice heavy with contempt. "Stop that nonsense."

But then there was another voice, and this one wasn't contemptuous. It was scared. "Stop it, Leah!" I opened my eyes and saw Sean standing in the hall.

"I'll handle this, Sean!" Delia ordered sharply. "Go away!"

But he was too scared to leave. "No, Leah!" he said, still standing in the hall, not daring to cross the threshold. "It's dangerous—you don't know how angry spirits get."

"Vince isn't angry at *us*." I glanced at my watch. Sam was coming at 1:30, as a witness and, if necessary, as my protector, but it was only 1:13 and I didn't know how long I could stall. I smiled. "He's angry at his murderer, not at *us*. Let's share happy news. Vince," I called, gazing upwards, "come enjoy this warm flame, this fragrant liquor. Come rejoice with us. Did you know Sean and Delia are going to California? They'll work with Ethan Lawrence and start a psychic network and become rich. It's the sort of thing *you* always wanted to do, and now your friends will have the chance. Aren't you happy for them, Vince?"

"Don't tell him that!" Sean cried, his voice hoarse with fear. "And stop saying his name! You'll call him back!"

Delia wheeled around to face him, disgusted. "Oh, be a man, Sean! You don't really swallow all this garbage, do you?"

He stared at her. "You never called it garbage before."

I swayed in my chair, wishing Sam would come. "Betrayal," I chanted. "She communicates but only to manipulate. She tells

Harvey of Vince's affair with Phoebe, only to stir up enmity. She talks to Emma and learns Vince is sleeping with callers just as he slept with students when he was a professor—and milking them for financial information. She tells Sean. She wants Sean to get mad at Vince, to strike Vince, to lose his job. She wants Sean to be forced to accept Ethan Lawrence's offer, to take her away to sunny, smoggy skies. Sean is happy at Budget Psychics, but she cares nothing for Sean's happiness. She cares only for wealth. And she knows Sean has a temper."

Sean turned wildly on Delia. "She's right. She knows I told you about how I messed up in California when I slugged that producer for giggling during a seance. You wanted me to mess up here, didn't you? That's why you told me about that call from Emma. That's why you dragged me to that pay phone and called Vince and held the receiver up so I could hear Emma laughing. You made me see what a slime-ball he was, Delia, and you goaded me to confront him. You *made* me do it!"

She sank into the chair next to my desk and glared at him, furious but already bored.

"I didn't *make* you do anything. I gave you information and hoped you'd use it sensibly. You were *supposed* to come here

and tell Vince that you quit. You were supposed to punch him, to make sure you'd never get your job back and would have to go to California. You *weren't* supposed to kill him. I *never* thought you'd overreact that much. You big baby!"

He roared, and leapt. Suddenly he'd knocked her chair over backwards, he was on top of her, his hands were around her throat. I jumped to my feet. "Vince!" I cried. "Vince! Vince!" That did it. Sean let go of Delia's throat and looked around, realizing suddenly that he was in the office, that he had unwittingly crossed the threshold. Horrified, he looked in all directions, spotted the pitcher on my desk, and seized it.

"Away, angry spirit!" he shouted and gave the pitcher a mighty heave. But it did no good. The pitcher was empty.

He fell to his knees. "Oh God," he sobbed. "No water."

"That's right," I said ruthlessly. "No water, no protection, and it's almost 2. And I told him about your new job—you *know* he'll be jealous. He'll take his revenge unless you appease him with the truth. Did you kill him?"

"Yes." Sean hid his face in his hands. "I didn't mean to, but he was so drunk—he laughed at me, at everything I believe in. I hit him, and he fell back in his

chair, and the telephone, and the cord—I strangled him. I took the life from him, and I haven't had a moment's peace since."

"You'll have more peace now that you've told the truth," I turned to Delia. "You're a witness. It's one thing to pretend you don't realize someone must have committed a murder so you can continue to exploit him. It's something else to hear a confession and then lie about it. You could go to prison for that. You *won't* lie about it, will you?"

She looked at him with hatred. "I wouldn't bother to lie about it. He's no good to me now. He's a baby." He was, at any rate, crying—crying and lying on the floor in a little ball, hugging himself with terror. I shook my head sadly, picked up the phone, and called 911.

### *Friday, April 20*

12:35 A.M. My last entry about Budget Psychics. My six weeks there are over, Elaine comes back from maternity leave on Monday, and I'm free. Sam is in the kitchen warming the chili and opening the wine, and I can finally gather my thoughts.

That Thursday night was the hardest. I had to watch Sean arrested (I despised what he had done but felt he'd been driven to it), but I also saw Harvey reunited with his wife, who probably

hadn't looked that radiant even on her wedding day.

At 5:30 A.M. Sam, Detective Brock and I sat down for a cup of coffee. "Well, you did it, Mrs. Abrams," Detective Brock said. "You figured it all out and solved my case. *How* did you do it?"

"It was a lot of things," I said. "The calls from Emma, the calls from California, and something Sam said about artists leaving signatures on their works, whether they mean to or not—I figured murderers leave signatures on their works, too. But mostly it was the water."

"The *water*?"

He looked stunned.

"*What* water?"

"The water on the floor of the supply closet. I remembered noticing it just before I looked up and saw poor Vince's body hanging. Finally I made the connection." I glanced at Sam, embarrassed. "It was when my Great-aunt Naomi died when I was a little girl. She was laid out in her bedroom, and when we went to see her, there was this puddle of water near the door. My grandparents were scandalized. They were immigrants, too, but they tried to be modern, and they thought Great-uncle Jacob was being very old-world, very retro. Very superstitious."

Brock squinted. "Great-uncle Jacob put the water there?"



"Yes. It used to be a custom among some Jews, and other peoples have similar customs. When someone dies, you pour water on the floor. It's a symbol of mourning, and it's supposed to form a barrier, to keep the spirit of the dead person from coming back to take revenge against anyone who'd wronged him or her. It's primitive; most modern Jews have never heard of it. We don't believe in avenging spirits. But Sean had studied with a Hasidic rabbi, and when Harvey said the pitcher in the office was empty—well, I wondered. And there were other things."

Brock nodded. "Such as?"

"Such as the candle left burning, and the fact that after Vince died, Sean never referred to him by name—it was always 'our deceased friend' or 'the departed one.' Well, I studied anthropology in college, and I remembered certain aborigine and Native American customs, and I knew Sean had spent time living in both cultures. I checked it out in the library, and it all came back. It's a custom to light fires after someone dies. Spirits warm themselves by the fire instead of coming after people who'd wronged them. And using a dead person's name can call the spirit back. So I guessed a superstitious person had killed Vince, and I guessed it was

Sean, and this afternoon I did several things that might unsettle him."

"Like spraying Jim Beam in the break room," Sam supplied. "And putting the candle on the table and hanging the telephone cord in the closet—that was all designed to get to Sean."

"Or to whoever the murderer might be," I corrected him. "I thought it was Sean, but I wasn't certain. Bess is a cynic, so I didn't suspect her, but Phoebe's a believer, and I wasn't sure about Delia. But I thought I could flush out the killer by faking those signs and making up a story about Vince's appearing in a dream, saying he'd come back the night before he was buried. In some cultures, spirits are thought to be especially potent before the body's laid to rest. I bet Sean left that Windex bottle on the desk, hoping that Harvey would return it to the supply closet and discover Vince's body. It must have driven Sean crazy to come to work the next day and realize the body was still hanging in the closet. I'm surprised he could function at all."

"Maybe he's tougher than you thought," Brock said. "Tough enough to be torn between the fear of an avenging spirit and the fear of getting arrested for murder. And this Delia—she's

plenty tough. What am I supposed to do with *her*?"

"Probably not much," I said glumly. "She inspired a murder, but it's probably more than she meant to inspire. She wanted Sean to get fired and accept Ethan Lawrence's offer. Afterwards she probably knew Sean must have murdered Vince, but you'd have a hard time proving that. You may have to just let her go."

And he did. I told Bess the truth, though, and she fired Delia—she'd destroyed Bess's top psychics, and Bess wasn't about to let her get away with that. So there was no cushy California deal for Delia, not even a Budget Psychics job as consolation. But it's too soon to count Delia out. She's opened a consulting firm, offering workshops in Stress Management and Leadership Development. I have a sick feeling she'll do fine.

Budget Psychics is doing fine, too. Bess hired a whole new crew of Prime Shift psychics, and business is better than ever, even without Phoebe. Phoebe left for California three weeks ago. After Sean's arrest, she called Ethan Lawrence several times to console him about

the loss of his favorite psychic, and they got close. So now Phoebe's going to star in the infomercials for Ethan's new psychic network. I wish her all the best.

As for Harvey, he hardly needs my wishes. Once the film of his fake trance wasn't considered evidence in a homicide any more, the local television station ran it endlessly. I thought it would end his career—I thought it would make it obvious that he was a fake, that he was pretending to find evidence in a suicide that everybody now knew to be a murder. But that wasn't the way it worked. That film made him famous. Budget Psychics was flooded with calls from people who wanted to tell everything to Harvey, trust everything to Harvey. Within days he left Budget Psychics and reopened his little tearoom, and he's doing fine. Last night he called to say he'd bought his wife a ruby tiara as a belated fortieth anniversary present.

Sam's calling me—the chili must be ready. Note: Tentative title for new book—*A Hermeneutics of Media Communications: Transgressive Credibility and Transcendent Celebrity*.

# UNSOLVED

by  
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the March issue.*

The tiny abbey of Aliquot stood aloof atop a sharp peak in southern France, overlooking the scattered peasants' cottages and vineyards below belonging to the ancient Chabossière family. The year was A.D. 1194; the month was August; the time was late afternoon.

Inside the nave the knight reverently placed a gem-encrusted reliquary on the altar. The rays of the low sun passing through the abbey's tinted panes made the gold gleam warmly and the huge jewels cast beams of red, green, and amber. The knight spoke to the old abbot standing at his side. "These were the instructions of my lord, the Sieur de Chabossière: to deliver this reliquary to the altar as a token of his thankfulness for his safe return from the Crusades. It contains the bones of the right hand of John the Baptist."

The good abbot crossed himself. "An appropriate gift in recognition of God's all-encompassing compassion for the fair Sieur."

"Holy Father, my lord and master has some concern about the safety of his precious gift."

"God will protect it. And few visitors come to our humble abbey."

"How many men are here to defend it in case some infidel should be tempted—"

"Put all fears to rest, my son. God *will* protect it. Although the seven friars residing here are, like myself, growing old, they are strengthened by the arm of the Almighty."

"To satisfy my master, who risked life and limb for the reliquary, may I spend the night to assure him all is in order?"

"Of course. We will soon have vespers and evening communion. Join us, if you desire. Meanwhile, I can introduce my friars to you."

The abbot led the way. The seven old friars threw back their cowls. The knight noticed that around their tonsures two had fringes of black hair, two had brown hair, two had red hair, and one had pure gray hair. The abbot introduced them as Algernon, Bertrand, Clément, Denis, Emile, François, and Gervais.

"They come from different provinces," said the abbot, "from Bur-

gundy, Champagne, Île-de-France, Lorraine, Marche, Normandy, and Poitou, to unite in our holy work." He added with a relaxed twinkle in his eye, "This particular year their ages—65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 72, and 73—exactly coincide with their heights in inches, although no friar's age in years matches his height in inches."

Becoming acquainted with the friars, the knight learned that:

(1) The friar aged 66 was two inches shorter than the one from Champagne and three inches taller than François. None of them had brown or gray hair.

(2) The friar from Poitou was three inches shorter than the one from Marche and three inches taller than the one from Lorraine. They had brown, black, and gray hair.

(3) The friar from Marche was two years younger than the one 69 inches tall and two years older than Gervais. None had red hair.

(4) The friar from Burgundy was not the shortest. The one from Poitou was not the youngest.

As the friars slowly marched single file to receive communion, the knight noted that:

(5) The friar 65 inches tall was just behind the one from Île-de-France and just ahead of Denis. They had brown, red, and gray hair.

(6) Algernon was the second friar behind the one 72 inches tall and the second one in front of the one 65 years old. They included two with brown hair and one with red hair.

(7) The tallest friar was just behind Emile and just ahead of the one aged 72 years. They came from Île-de-France, Lorraine, and Normandy. Each had a different hair color.

(8) The friar from Burgundy was just behind Bertrand and just ahead of the one 70 inches tall. Their ages were 66, 68, and 69. Their hair color included brown, black, and red.

As he completed communion the elderly abbot gasped. *The reliquary was gone!* He crossed himself and pleaded, "Lord, please tell me it isn't true."

The knight rose. "Begging your pardon, Father, but I watched the altar all during communion. The priceless reliquary was taken by the taller of the two redhaired friars." Unsheathing his long sword, the knight strode forward to take the thief into custody.

*Who was the felonious friar who filched the fabulous reliquary?*

# Belinda and the Secret Weapon

## Alan Gordon



“Oh, help,” cried Belinda Pressman as a precariously balanced stack of case files succumbed to gravity. “Oh, help and bother,” she cried as they cascaded into the To Do Eventu-

ally pile, sending the whole assembly crashing to the floor. Their contents spilled out and commingled, investigation requests mixing with subpoena requests, arrest photos with 911 tapes, mandatory persistent vi-

olent felons with discretionary persistent nonviolent felons.

"What's wrong?" asked Blair, her officemate, without bothering to turn around. "Whenever you quote Winnie the Pooh, it's serious."

"I have inadvertently cleaned my desk," she said.

"About time," he commented. "Are you down to the blotter?"

"I'm not sure I ever had a blotter," she said, scooping up a pile of Chinese mustard and duck sauce packages that had been exposed for the first time since the Year of the Rat. "I'm down to the wood. Well, not quite. Here's a lot of pencil shavings and eraser shreds and what I'm afraid to say is old Kleenex."

"Ah," said Blair. "What Pynchon referred to as 'the bureaucratic smegma.'"

She tried to shoot an ancient rubber band at the back of his head, but it snapped in her hands.

"Thanks," she said. "I quote Winnie the Pooh, and you have to bring in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Makes me feel real smart."

"Sorry," he said, not meaning it.

She spent close to an hour putting everything in order. Order as she defined it, anyway. When she was done, she looked at her desk for a long time.

"That's it," she said. "I'm quitting."

"For the day?" said Blair.

"I'm quitting Legal Aid," she said. This made him turn around. "I am tired of having a caseload that would choke a whale and clients who think you're selling them out and judges who patronize you while they suck up to the private bar and a lousy medical plan and going on strike every three years and a tiny office with a lousy view."

"At least you have the window," he pointed out. "And you have me."

"Blair, it's not enough. I've done it for seven years. I should have left when my pension vested, but I stayed on because of some screwed up liberal value system."

"You mean . . ." he said.

"Yes, Blair. The time has come for me to sell out. What do you think of that?"

"Can I have your desk?" he asked, eyeing the window greedily.

Belinda sighed and picked up her phone.

"Who are you calling?" asked Blair, intrigued.

"Jerry Skolnick."

He whistled. "You really are selling out."

"Only if he's buying. Hello, may I speak to Jerry? Jerry, it's Belinda Pressman. Right, from the Hernandez trial. You up for

lunch? My treat. How's Il Fornai? Good, see you there."

She arrived five minutes early. He was already there, pacing the sidewalk until he saw her waving.

"Hello, counselor," he said, shaking her hand. "I know what you make, so I won't abuse the free lunch privileges."

"I picked this place because I could afford it," she replied. "Go wild. Have the gnocchi and die happy."

They ordered and dug competitively into the breadbasket.

"You want to make your pitch before or after the main course?" he asked, smiling.

"What pitch is that?"

"Hey, I'm not the type to attract a lady like you, what with the twenty years' difference and the gold band on my finger, so I'm guessing you're looking for a new job."

"You're the best, Jerry. How about it? You kind of hinted you could use my talents after that trial we did together."

"That was fun, wasn't it? I hit 'em high, you hit 'em low, and we didn't have to sell each other out to get the win. Although you thought about it, didn't you?"

"It was Plan C, but we didn't have to go to it."

"And what plan is this?"

"Plan A. There is no other plan. My table-dancing days are over."

He leaned back, sipped his wine, and looked her over. He saw a slender blonde in her early thirties with blue eyes that he knew could lead a witness right over a cliff. "As it happens, Bernie wants to go to Miami to end his days. He actually has grandchildren there, figure that for a switch. So I could use someone. How soon can you start?"

"Two weeks. With the funding cuts, they'll be happy to replace me with a rookie salary."

"The eighties are over, kid. In the next millennium, there'll be no Bill of Rights. That leaves us about two years to make some serious dough."

"The next required topic."

"What're you making now?"

"High forties, with full medical coverage."

"Indemnity?"

"Nah, an HMO with some bells and whistles. I'm single and cheap."

"I'll start you at forty-four, but you gotta get your own coverage."

"Screw that. I'm better than that."

"Not that much."

"Tell you what. Pay me what I'm getting now, but I'll take care of my own medical. And I want partner in three years."

"Forty-six, your own medical, and partner in four years, three



if you bring in over a hundred grand in business in the third."

"Buy Bernie a plane ticket. I'll see you in two weeks."

She spent the first week adjourning all her cases until after her departure, the second writing notes to her files and clearing out her office. The obligatory farewell party took place at the usual over-amped sports bar, and all the men spent their time pretending to converse while glancing up at the monitors.

Her supervisor loomed in front of her, trying to focus. "To Belinda, good colleagues. Another good one gone, God help us all!"

"God help us all!" chorused her friends in salute.

He leaned over. "So, Pressman, now that we no longer have a working relationship, when can I start sexually harassing you?"

She smiled. "Boss, now that we no longer have a working relationship, I can finally tell you what I think of you. You're a drunken, lecherous pig..."

"Thank you."

"... but you taught me how to try a case. Thanks. And if you ever lay a finger on me, I will knock you back to the Stone Age where you belong."

He presented her with a monogrammed briefcase, and she was off.

The offices of Skolnick, Fish-

baum and Derringer were in the Woolworth Building with a decent view of City Hall. A receptionist with nails long and sharp enough to handle most of the functions of a Swiss Army knife waved her into Skolnick's office. He was on the phone but motioned her to a chair in front of his desk. She looked around the office, noting the black and white photographs of the younger versions of the partnership with the Columbia student rallies, black activists, feminist activists, gay activists, giving way to color photographs of the recent versions standing with ranking religious figures, politicians, and mafiosi. She noted with approval the telescope on the windowsill, then examined it more closely and realized that it was a sight from a rifle.

"Okay, okay," he was saying. "Four o'clock on the corner by the subway entrance. Yeah, got it. Later." He hung up and held out his arms without standing up.

"Welcome to my world," he intoned. "Office space is a little chaotic at the moment. Harvey's moving into Bernie's office, Sandy's going into Harvey's, so you can have Sandy's by Friday. You can camp out with Shirley of the Technicolored Talons until then, she's got cards for you and that stuff."

"Sounds good. What about actual work?"

"As it happens, you came at an opportune time. Judge Edsel's pushing me into a trial before I'm quite ready, and we just got a line on a witness. Only problem, he's reluctant, as in scared witless of the cops. But word is he saw the thing go down."

"What thing is that?"

"Tactical Narcotics Team goes wilding in the Walker Houses, slams about thirty of our nation's youth against a fence, and then gets personal. Our hero was visiting a friend, takes umbrage at being in a Fourth Amendment Free Fire Zone, starts quoting the Constitution at them."

"Uh-oh."

"Exactly. TNT takes everything they found on the group, flakes our budding civil libertarian with it, and now he's got a B felony staring at him, both on weight and intent to sell."

"He have priors?"

"No, so he can take the stand okay. But we'd like to get some backup from the other civilians present. And our source at the projects has located one."

"You have sources?" she said, impressed.

"Ms. Pressman, everyone we've ever represented and their spawn become sources. I believe strongly in gratitude. I believe

even more strongly in payback. Now I need you to go convince our unwilling hero to come to court on Thursday. Think you can do that?"

"Sure thing."

"Think she can do that?" he said, looking straight at her.

"Oh yeah, she can," rasped a voice directly behind her.

She didn't know if records were kept for the sitting high jump, but she was certain she had just qualified for the Olympics in that event. It wasn't just that she hadn't heard the man enter the room but that she knew the voice and loathed it. After landing, she turned slowly and peeked over the top of the high-backed chair.

"Belinda Pressman, I'd like to introduce you to the Secret Weapon," said Skolnick, beaming.

"We've met," she said icily.

"Yes, we have," agreed the man, shaking her hand. She shivered. It was hard as a rock, and the calluses that clustered around the knuckles were the residue of a professional head-busting career.

"Detective Corrigan," she said. He smiled, a mouthful of yellowed, cracked teeth, three gold. Also among the missing was his hair, his scalp gleaming. Some men look good bald. He wasn't one of them.

"Surprised to see me?" he asked.

"Very. Last place I thought you'd end up would be working for the defense."

He shrugged. "A job's a job. It beats wearing a security guard's uniform seven nights a week."

"Which is where I found him," said Skolnick.

"Which is where I put him," said Pressman.

Skolnick looked back and forth at the two of them. "So you were the one," he said, considering.

"Ms. Pressman and I had a few professional run-ins a few years back," said Corrigan. "I won the first few."

"Initially," she interrupted.

"But then she sicced Internal Affairs on me. It looked like it was gonna stick, so I cut a deal and retired with full pension."

"And the convictions were reversed without objection," she finished.

"Well, great," crowed Skolnick. "Since you have this beautiful relationship established, I'm going to let him go along with you."

"But . . ." she started to protest. He cut her off with a gesture.

"You work for me now," he said. "So does he. Mr. Corrigan, for all his former flaws, still investigates a case as well as anyone I've ever had. He's very persuasive with witnesses."

"I'll bet," muttered Pressman. Corrigan looked at her oddly, and she shivered again.

"He comes up with stuff, I don't know how he does it. And I don't want to know. And you either get along with him or we get along without you," finished Skolnick.

"Time's awasting," she said, getting to her feet. "Give me the info and we're off."

Corrigan held open the door of his car for her with exaggerated gallantry, and she slid in. He slammed the door and got in the driver's seat. She had a few seconds to take in the vehicle. It was a guy car, an '89 Mustang that smelled of vinyl cleaner, pizza, and latex. She wondered if she could sit without touching the seat. He started the engine by ramming a screwdriver into the steering column.

"Ignition got popped two years ago," he explained as they shot across the Brooklyn Bridge. "I keep meaning to have it repaired, but what's the rush, right?"

"How do you get it through inspection?" she asked.

"There's a guy at Inspection who owes me," he replied. "Owes me for a long, long time." He grinned at her, and she wondered if he could find a dentist who owed him as well.

"I want to get something clear before we get there," she said.

"This is a legal situation, not an investigation. I'm the lawyer, you're . . ."

"The bodyguard," he said.

"The witness," she corrected him.

"And the bodyguard," he corrected her. "You're a Manhattan lawyer, this is Queens. You don't know the Walker Houses. I do. Buddy of mine in the 114 says they pull a body out of there twice a month. You can't throw a rock without hitting a gang member, and if you do hit one, he'll pull out a nine and empty the clip. So I'm your bodyguard."

"You carrying?" she asked. He opened his jacket slightly to show a .38 tucked into his armpit. "That gonna protect little ol' me from those nasty gang members?"

"Depends how fast you can run," he answered. "I can buy you eight seconds in a pinch, assuming I don't get hit first, and then you're on your own. Here's hoping it ain't necessary."

It was three thirty when they hit the projects. Corrigan parked the car facing the way they had come and scanned the street. "Our contact doesn't seem to be here yet. Shall we take some pictures while we're waiting?"

"After you," she replied with what she hoped was bravado. He pulled a camera out of the

glove compartment and headed towards the courtyard.

Four clumps of eight story brick buildings, gathered around an inner courtyard about the size of a city block. Some dilapidated playground equipment. Sickly trees growing from four foot square dirt plots, smelling of urine from various coexisting city species, not excluding human. Many wooden benches, paint peeling, formerly dark green, with narrow boards missing or broken. Newer benches, still dark green, made of a more durable composite of recyclables, past unknown, possibly toxic.

Three little African-American girls double-Dutch jump-roping in the walkway paused when they saw the European-Americans walking toward them. One, fearful but curious, sized them up, addressed Belinda. "You gonna evict us?" she said in a matter-of-fact, almost dead tone.

"Oh no, honey," said Pressman, heartbroken in an instant.

"You arresting someone?"

"No, dear."

"Then what do you want?"

"We're social workers," said Corrigan. The girls looked at him in disdain and went back to their ropes.

There was a crack sale in progress at the other end of the courtyard, and Corrigan tactfully waited until it was over be-

fore producing the camera. Half the people around began casually ambling away when they noticed him, and he nodded in recognition. He started snapping photographs of the fence. Four men in their early twenties began walking meaningfully towards them. Corrigan slipped the camera into his coat pocket and turned to face them, muscles tensing. Before the group got quite up in his face, Pressman slipped in between, holding up her I.D.

"We're investigating for a criminal defense case," she said quickly.

The leader of the group glanced at the card. "You Legal Aid or 18-B?" he said. The others snickered.

"Private," she said coolly.

They glanced at each other. "Someone's spending some money," said one. "Legal Aid wouldn't do that."

"I did it all the time when I was with Legal Aid," she snapped. "And I'm doing it now. You mind?"

They backed away and quickly broke into a fierce debate over the relative merits of different defense lawyers. Corrigan resumed his photographing.

"I thought they liked Legal Aid," he said.

"Nah, they just see us as part of the system," she said. "And since we're the ones they talk to,

we're the ones they end up blaming. And when they play it safe and take the plea bargain, they tell their buddies it's because their Legal Aid lawyer made them."

"I had no idea," he said, not sounding too sympathetic.

"My favorite bit of prison folklore was that we got fifty bucks for every plea we took."

"Just think, now you're private and cost a grand."

"Yeah, well, like you care," she muttered.

"I care about finding this witness. Let's go back out. I don't want to be here when the sun sets."

A black man in his late twenties wearing reflector shades and a finely sculpted goatee sidled up to them when they emerged. "You're from Skolnick," he said.

"How'd you know?" asked Corrigan with a smirk.

"Come on," said the man.

"I'm Belinda Pressman. I'm an associate of Mr. Skolnick's," she said. He ignored both the introduction and her proffered hand and led them to one of the buildings.

"He's on the eighth floor, in apartment C," he said as he went through the broken doorway. "He'll talk, but he doesn't want to go to court."

"We'll talk to him," she said and strode towards the elevator.

The other two stayed in place as she hit the button and waited. "Doesn't work," she concluded quickly. "I suppose you both knew that."

"Steps over here," said the contact.

"You go first," directed Corrigan. The man looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged and went to the stairwell. Pressman started to follow and was immediately shoved firmly against the wall. "And you go last," he said. He took his revolver out of its holster, thumbed the safety, and put it in his coat pocket, leaving his hand on it. Then he entered.

"I don't think that was necessary," she said, following.

He ignored her, peering up at the second floor landing. The contact glanced behind at the two of them and laughed quietly to himself. "Don't worry, Mister Ex-cop, you'll be safe here. You're with me."

"Great," muttered Corrigan as he started the climb.

The stairwell gave the lie to the brick facade of the building. It was standard-issue concrete blocks, too narrow for physical or psychological comfort and painted an old, thin, greenish-yellow that provided an excellent base for resident artists and poets.

"Jesus, look at this," muttered Corrigan as they hit the fifth

floor landing. It was filled with trash and crawling with roaches. "It's a freakin' alien landscape."

The contact turned around and took his shades off, anger shooting from his eyes like lasers. "You listen, Ex-pig. This ain't no alien landscape. We have to live here every day, and most of us get by just fine. The only alien here is you."

"We apologize," Belinda said quickly. "Don't we, Mr. Corrigan?"

"I'm very sorry," he said. "Let's go."

They reached the eighth floor. Pressman was secretly pleased to see that Corrigan was winded while she was still going strong. "Want me to hold your gun until you're ready?" she whispered.

He glared. "After you, counselor."

They followed the contact to the apartment. He rapped lightly on the door.

"Yeah?" came a man's voice.

"LeRoi, it's C," said the contact. "Got those people from that lawyer, the one that got Fish off last year." The door opened, and a young black man in a Dogg Pound T-shirt looked out at them.

"My name's Belinda Pressman, I'm an attorney," she said, handing him her card. "This is Mr. Corrigan, an investigator

from our office. We'd like to ask you some questions."

He waved them in. Corrigan had a murmured conversation with the contact, shook hands, and closed the door. She got a glimpse of something green in the handshake.

"You want me to make a statement, right?" said LeRoi.

"For a start," she said. "You saw the TNT raid on the courtyard?"

"Yeah, I seen it. I was in it. They shoved us up against the fence. Then that one guy starts saying they can't do this, and they whaled on him. Then they started picking up people's stash from under the bushes and saying, 'We got you, boy. We gonna do you good.'"

"Any of that stash yours?"

"No, I'm clean."

"What do you do for a living, LeRoi? And what's your last name, by the way?"

"Toussaint, LeRoi Toussaint. I work, got my GED last year, now I'm an assistant manager at DMZ Records in midtown. Starting night school at LaGuardia next fall."

"Any record?"

"None."

"So, can you come in on Thursday to testify?"

Toussaint looked at them. "No one said I had to testify. You got my statement. Let me sign it and you can use that."

"Unfortunately, we can't use a written statement in court," said Pressman. "We need you in person. It won't be more than two hours out of your day."

"No. I can't do that."

"This guy's looking at some serious state time if he doesn't get help."

"That's not my problem."

There was a sharp pop, and she jumped. It emanated from Corrigan, who was cracking his knuckles.

"Sorry," he said. "They get stiff when I don't use them."

My way, she mouthed to him, and he nodded slightly.

"Mr. Toussaint," she said, opening her briefcase. "We didn't come here to chitchat. We came to obtain you as a witness. I realize it's inconvenient, but you're all we have to help this kid."

"No," he said.

"I want to show you something," she continued. "Do you know what this is?" She held up a piece of green construction paper. He looked at it, puzzled.

"It's just a piece of green paper," he said, looking for the trick.

"Absolutely correct," she said. "Here's another one." She held up a dollar bill. "This one is worth a buck. The other is worth nothing. Yet they're both pieces of green paper. Why is one more valuable?"



"'Cause it's money," said Toussaint.

"And why is money valuable?" she pressed him.

He looked puzzled. "'Cause the government says so."

"That's right," she said. "Just another piece of green paper, but it's backed up by law and the United States Treasury. Remarkable, isn't it?"

"So what?" he said, unimpressed.

"Now I'm going to show you another piece of paper," she said. She pulled out a printed white sheet, about six by eight inches, and handed it to him.

"This is a subpoena. You have just been served. Could you sign here?" She held out a pen, and he scribbled his name on her copy. "Just a piece of paper but very powerful. Why? Because it's backed up by law and the government, just like that dollar bill. See what it says there? That if you don't show up you'll be subject to a fine. Two hundred and fifty dollars, just for ignoring a piece of paper. But wait! There's more!" She pulled out two more, stapled together. His eyes were glued to the briefcase. "This one's my favorite," she said. "An order to show cause. That's the one we give to the court if you ignore the first one. Then you have to show up in court and persuade the judge he shouldn't charge you even

more money for every day you don't show up. Starts to get expensive after a while, doesn't it?"

"Stop messing with me," he said.

She shook her head. "I'm not messing, LeRoi. I'm here to keep an innocent man out of jail. And you're going to help me do it whether you want to or not. We'd prefer you to be a willing witness."

"And that's the show?" he said.

"Nope," she said, and opened the briefcase yet again. She pulled out a sheaf of documents, then hesitated. "This one, LeRoi, I don't like to use. It scares me a little, to tell you the truth. I've only used it once, and I didn't sleep well for weeks afterwards." She slapped it down on the table, and Toussaint flinched. "The material witness order, LeRoi. The Terminator. This lets me take a reluctant witness and throw him in jail until he's softened up enough to testify. Ever been in jail, LeRoi?"

"No," he whispered.

"Not a nice place. I got clients in Rikers, every two weeks I see them with a new scar. And with these pieces of paper two officers will come to your door and take you away to join them. All I have to do is sign." She picked up her pen. "Shall I?"

Corrigan leapt up. "Out!" he shouted, and before she was quite aware of what was happening, she had been deposited, briefcase and all, in the hallway. The door slammed shut and locked.

"Corrigan, damn it!" she shouted, banging on the door to no avail. "Great," she muttered, pacing rapidly in front of it while neighbors poked their heads out and stared. "One shot to the face and I get disbarred. And we lose the case," she added, trying to get her priorities in order. "No, we don't want to punch out innocent witnesses," she said, finally succeeding in getting them in order. She stopped and placed her ear against the door. Nothing that sounded like fist hitting civilian. Just the murmur of male voices. Then the door opened suddenly, and she nearly fell inside.

Toussaint and Corrigan looked at her, the former with trepidation, the latter with his normal smirk.

"So we'll see you Thursday," said Corrigan, turning and shaking Toussaint's hand.

"You got it," replied Toussaint.

"And dress nicely, this is a courtroom," added Corrigan.

"Okay. Go away, I'm cool."

Corrigan stepped into the doorway, and she had no choice but to back into the hall. The door slammed behind him.

"Let's go," he said.

"But . . ."

"Now. Everything's fine."

She timed her explosion for when they hit the sidewalk. "What the hell did you think you were doing?" she yelled.

"My job," he replied. "You wanna ride back with me or take the subway?"

Curiosity won out over anger by a nose. She got in the car.

"You hurt him?" she asked.

He laughed. "Such an opinion you have of me. I'm insulted. No, I didn't touch him."

"Then what did you tell him?"

He glanced at her sideways, keeping his eyes on traffic. "Let's see if it works before I tell you."

"And if it doesn't?"

"You have all of those pretty pieces of paper." And he said no more on the subject. She gave up and glowered at the people stuck in traffic along with them.

On Thursday morning she arrived at eight. Skolnick was already there. So was Toussaint, dressed for success, having his testimony sculpted into its ideal shape. As the two men turned to look at her, Skolnick smiled and Toussaint flinched.

She was still working out of a bookshelf and chair in the main office while the movers were transferring files from one office to another. She waved as Skol-

nick and Toussaint left for court. Corrigan sauntered in at nine.

"He showed," she informed him.

"I know," he said. "I saw them leaving. Nice kid, should do well."

"How'd you do it?" she asked reluctantly.

"I told him who I was," he said slowly.

"And that scared him into showing?"

"No. I told him all about what I used to be, what I used to do to people, the toughest cop in the city. And then I told him that in twenty-five years, there was only one person I ran into who beat me, who scared the hell out of me. And that was you."

She scrutinized his face for any sign that he was conning her but found none.

"Let me get this straight," she said. "You did a good cop, bad cop on the kid?"

"Yup."

"And I was the bad cop?"

"Yup."

"Ewww," she said, shivering.

"It worked, didn't it?"

"And that's what matters?"

He shrugged. "We get more work when the work we do works. Same as your old job. So,

see you later, counselor. I gotta go uptown on a job."

She covered some cases, got her Federal Court I.D., and came back to find the office in full party mode. Skolnick waved her over to a happy pack of people surrounding the former defendant.

"Meet the freest man in New York!" he shouted, and she high-fived everyone there. "Kid," he said, turning to his client. "Meet the Secret Weapon." She turned, looking for Corrigan, then realized Skolnick was talking about her.

"Partner in three years," she whispered into his ear.

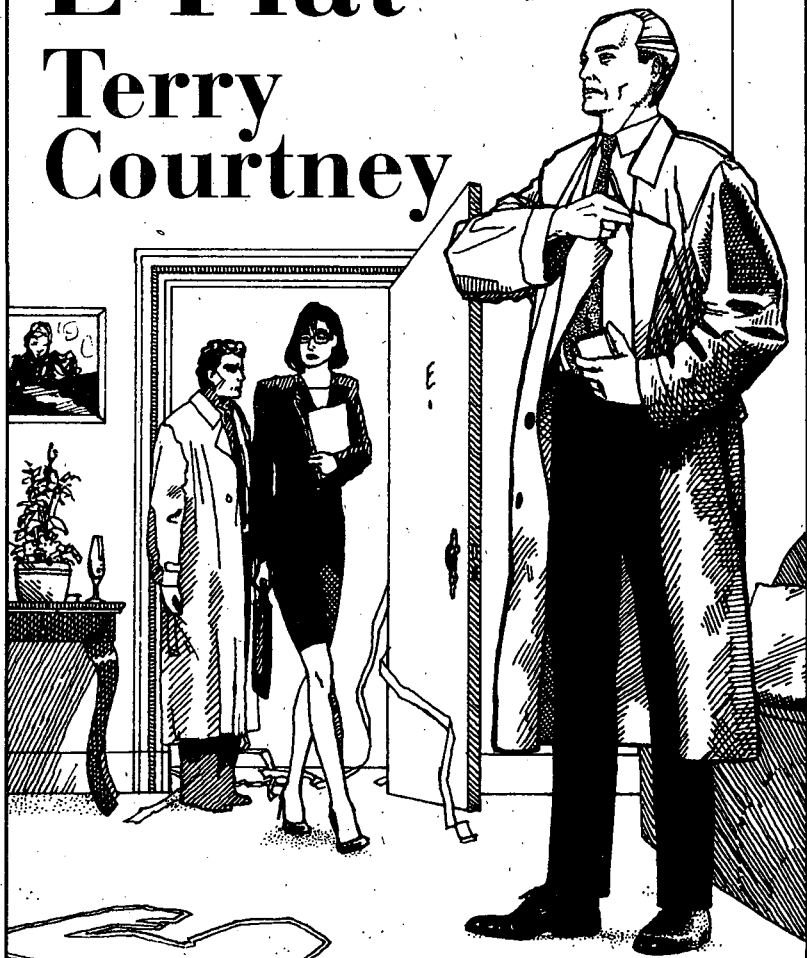
"We'll talk," he said, beaming. Shirley came up and handed her a set of keys.

"Your office is ready," she said. Pressman picked up her new briefcase, the files containing her new caseload, and carried them into her new office with its old furniture. She scattered the files across the desk so that it looked suitably messy, then sat back in her chair, propped her feet up on the windowsill, and gazed out at City Hall.

"Partner in three," she said to herself. "Definitely."

FICTION

# Murder in E Flat Terry Courtney



On an overcast Friday morning in early October, Detective Frank Whalen swallowed a yawn as he looked at his partner across the facing desks in the homicide squad room. "Do we begin the day by browbeating our five suspects, or do we wait for the reports, oh fearless decisionmaker?"

Leo Schott shook his head, pointing in the direction of an interrogation room. "This is Friday. We begin with the homicide squad singalong."

"I forgot. The Captain-Noblitt-Easy-Method-of-Homicide-Investigations-for-Fun-and-Profit."

Six years earlier Noblitt had assumed command of the homicide squad and initiated an unprecedented corporate think tank approach to the procedures. On Tuesday and Friday mornings there was a meeting of the five homicide investigation teams plus a sergeant and the captain. Each team briefed the group on the details and progress of their current cases. Comments and suggestions from the group were encouraged. The bottom line: twelve men lent their expertise to each case, and the results were more often than not effective.

Captain Noblitt rapped the table for quiet. "All right, let's get to it." He indicated Whalen and

Schott. "You two lead off. You caught a winner last night. I've already had six calls from On High. Expect much pressure."

"You guys caught the late Lamenthe?"

"My sister was a big fan of his. Has all his records."

"Who's Lamenthe?"

Whalen opened his notebook. "All the media cartwheels are due to a medical examiner with a big mouth talking on camera to a TV crew last night. He's apparently above and beyond no comment. Anyway, fifty-year-old Ferdinand Lamenthe, Jr., was a concert pianist. According to the morning papers, he was the greatest ever. World famous. Concerts, recordings, television specials, played the White House and Buckingham Palace. The leader of the classical pack by far. Probably called Pavarotti Bubba."

"Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore!'," Schott said. "He got back to town yesterday morning to close a forty-one-city concert tour. He played last night at Symphony Hall. He always finishes up a tour here at home."

Whalen flipped a page. "After the concert he went home with a small group of friends to celebrate a successful tour. Present were his secretary, business manager, road manager, fiancée, and an Englishman who was his European-tour promot-

er. When they got to his plush apartment, sorry, make that flat, in the Park Adams, Lamenthe got out of his formal suit, showered, dressed casually, and came out to socialize. In a few minutes he drank one good swallow of sherry and fifteen seconds later began to choke and turn purple. Fell onto the floor in the throes. Nine-one-one was called, and the paramedics came. He was dead. We were called. The medical examiner said cyanide. He mentioned coloring, facial distortion, and mainly the faint odor of bitter almonds coming from the dead man's mouth. Also the time. Lamenthe ate two small jellyrolls that were part of the snacks the secretary had arranged, but another guest ate four or five and was fine so we ruled them out. We figured the poison was in the wine. It was a special wine just for Lamenthe. His friends were drinking champagne. We had everyone printed; forensics is checking the wine, bottle, and glass. That's where we are. Nobody saw anything; as usual, everybody loved the dead man. We're waiting for forensics and the autopsy. The secretary is our best bet for details, but she totally fell apart. Had to be heavily sedated. It must have been a homicide. It's unlikely it was coincidence, the man taking a drink of sherry and fifteen sec-

onds later having a coronary or something natural, then the medical examiner going melodramatic."

"Why did you change 'apartment' to 'flat' just now?"

Whalen chuckled. "The Park Adams is that really elegant old building on Armstrong Place. Back then they were called flats, and the Park Adams never changed. The building manager was quick to correct us when we asked which apartment we wanted. Mr. Lamenthe resides in E flat, thank you. Not important."

Captain Noblitt said, "Don't wait for the reports. Assume homicide. Time is not on our side, not with all the important, interested citizens."

Schott said, "We've had three hours' sleep, captain."

The captain spread his hands, shrugging. "I'll mention your heroics to the mayor when he calls again about your case."

**R**uth Jones, the dead man's secretary, was in her apartment several blocks from the Park Adams. On the ride up in the mirrored elevator, the partners looked at their reflections, adjusting ties, brushing unseen lint. Frank Whalen ran a hand through his thick, curly auburn hair. He had an unlined face that belied his forty years, a

fact he used to advantage now that he was unmarried again. Leo Schott looked somewhat older than his forty years, his sparse blond hair graying, eyes baggy, deep lines around his mouth. The two men had been homicide partners for ten years.

Ruth Jones's apartment was feminine and frilly, with at least a dozen framed photographs of her late employer adorning the living room walls, the largest autographed *To the best secretary and friend a man ever had*. She gestured to a sofa and sat down in an overstuffed chair facing them, a dark-haired, medium-sized woman in her late thirties who might be pretty once the despair and the puffiness from crying left her face.

"How may I help you?" Her tone was lifeless.

Whalen said, "We know this is an awful time, Ms. Jones, but the sooner we begin, the better chance we have of catching whoever did this to Mr. Lamenthe."

"I don't remember much of last night after Ferdinand collapsed, but I do recall the doctor's saying he'd been poisoned."

"Apparently," Schott said.

Ms. Jones raised her head, her sadness a shroud.

"No one would have wanted to harm Ferdinand."

Whalen said, "Tell us about the sherry."

"It was Ferdinand's favorite."

"I didn't recognize the name, Pelacheo. I don't think I've ever heard of it. Expensive?"

Ruth Jones shook her head. "It's quite inexpensive. 'Cheap' would be an appropriate word. Ferdinand had no pretensions. He was served it several years ago and loved it. It became his wine of choice. All his friends and I tried it and found it awful. Ferdinand didn't care. He liked it, and that was all that mattered. I always kept a supply on hand for him. His guests last night had champagne, but as always, there was a bottle of Pelacheo sherry for Ferdinand."

Schott looked up from his notes. "So no one else was likely to drink it: Who had access to the bottle? Who might have tampered with it?"

"But the bottle hadn't been opened."

"A syringe," Whalen said.

Ms. Jones blew her nose. "I do not believe any of Ferdinand's friends were capable of that, or possessed of a reason. No, impossible. You'll see. Yesterday was Thursday. I was on tour with Ferdinand, of course. I flew back on Tuesday morning to get the flat in order. I noticed there was none of his wine left, so I phoned the liquor store and ordered three cases along with six bottles of champagne for last night."



Whalen arched an eyebrow. "Three cases?"

"Ferdinand was going to be home for four months before his next European tour. Thirty-six bottles of wine over one hundred and twenty days is certainly not excessive."

"Of course not. Sorry."

"Tuesday afternoon the liquor store delivered the champagne and one case of Ferdinand's wine. It was all they had until Monday. Ferdinand insisted on cold wine, so I put three bottles in the refrigerator and the rest in a closet we keep for that purpose. That's it. The wine stayed in the refrigerator until last night. I left the concert at intermission and went to the flat. I put out the food and glasses, filled three ice buckets, and put out two bottles of champagne and one bottle of Pelacheo."

"When everyone got back to the flat, what happened?" Schott asked. "Anything unusual?"

"No. One of the men uncorked a bottle of champagne, and everyone had some. Ferdinand was changing clothes. When he came out, he stopped to eat two of his favorite jellyrolls, then sat down on the sofa next to Ms. Colton. I uncorked his sherry, poured him a glass, and gave it to him. I turned away to talk to someone. Then behind me I heard Ferdinand make this awful gagging sound. I turned, and

he was just getting up, his face going purple, his hands gripping his sweater up here near his heart. He fell down, twitching and strangling. I immediately phoned for help. Before the paramedics arrived, Ferdinand jerked twice like he was having convulsions and was still. They said he was dead."

"So you didn't uncork the wine until Mr. Lamenthe came in?"

"No."

Whalen propped an ankle on a knee and laid his notebook on his leg, pen poised. "Ms. Jones, tell us about everyone who came to the flat from the time you put the wine in the refrigerator Tuesday afternoon until last night. Everyone."

As Ms. Jones pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed, the telephone on the table next to her rang. She answered and listened briefly, then held out the receiver. "It's for one of you. If you want privacy, there's a phone in the kitchen." She pointed. Whalen left the room, and the secretary listened for a moment, then replaced the instrument.

Schott said, "How long did you work for Mr. Lamenthe?"

Ms. Jones sniffed. "Seventeen wonderful years," she said, hugging her middle, her sorrow close to overwhelming her.

"You must have started very young."

"Thank you," she whispered.  
"That was kind."

"Did Mr. Lamenthe have any family?"

"A brother in Canada. Montreal. That's all."

Whalen was gone longer than Schott expected, and he and the secretary made what amounted to small talk. When Whalen returned, he said, "Thank you for your time, Ms. Jones. We won't bother you any more today. If we have to talk to you again, we'll call."

Schott stood up, giving Whalen a quizzical look. Whalen ignored him and headed for the door. Schott waited until they were riding down in the elevator to ask. "What?"

Whalen was grinning. "You remember I mentioned coincidence? Forensics finished going over our evidence. No poison in the wine or on the glass. Not a trace. The only fingerprints on the bottle were Ruth Jones's, and they belong. We may not have a case at all."

"What about the smell of bitter almonds on the corpse's breath?"

"The great man might have had halitosis, and the doctor an imagination working overtime."

"Where are we going?"

"I called Chopper. He finished the autopsy, now he's waiting for some last test results. He should have them by the time

we get to the morgue. If it's the way it seems, we can put a bow on this case today, and the media vultures can go on to someone else."

The green-walled and stainless steel-filled autopsy room at the county morgue had that particular smell that always made the partners' noses twitch. Chief County Pathologist Gillespie—tall and portly, his black hair thinning—was washing his hands at a sink.

"Hey, Chopper," Whalen called.

Gillespie shut off the water and turned, drying his hands on a paper towel, his dark eyes merry behind a pair of thick-lensed glasses. "Well, if it isn't my two favorite sleuths, Mr. Frick and Mr. Frack. How goes it in the natural world of unnatural death?"

Schott said, "Unfortunately, we never have a recession."

"If you did, you might have to get real jobs. Count your blessings."

"Cute. What about the late Ferdinand Lamenthe, Jr.?"

The doctor retrieved a file folder from the top of a cabinet and opened it. "An interesting case. Inventive. Innovative. Or maybe I just don't read enough."

Schott said, "You mean it wasn't natural causes?"

"Oh no. The man was poisoned. Hydrogen cyanide. Suffi-

cient dose that he never had a chance."

Whalen laced his fingers together on top of his head. "Chopper, the man drank some wine, the only questionable thing he ingested. Forensics has reported. No poison. I'm told cyanide is the fastest acting poison known. Fifteen to thirty seconds after you swallow it you're in very serious trouble. So how did he get it? He was in the room for five minutes in front of five witnesses before he collapsed."

"He ingested the poison in a capsule, traces of which we found in his stomach. There's no other way that amount of cyanide could have gotten all the way to his stomach. He must have been on medication, although there were no obvious signs of a medical problem. Check with his physician. Since it takes thirty to forty-five minutes for a capsule to dissolve—well, you get the implication. Incidentally, the cyanide was a common type. It's used in fumigants, fertilizer, et cetera. Over-the-counter stuff. Empty capsules can be bought in most pharmacies, or the killer took one of the victim's capsules and replaced the medication with the cyanide. That's more likely—the colors would need to match. Sooner or later it was bound to be swallowed. Adios, piano man. Sorry if I ruined your day."

"If the cyanide was in his stomach, how did the medical examiner smell it on his breath?"

"The man was convulsing, dying. Bile rose in his throat."

"Can you be more specific about the cyanide? A brand name?"

"Impossible."

Schott said, "So we start all over." He turned to Whalen. "Ruth Jones, they're *baaack*."

Whalen nodded. "But first let's talk to Lamenthe's lawyer. Now that we know for sure it was murder, who profits? We crawl before we stagger."

Attorney Dean Middageten was in his forties and average in every way—height, weight, features, attire. He seated the partners before his desk and checked their identification. Satisfied he said, "You actually suspect Mr. Lamenthe's death was foul play?"

"Mr. Lamenthe was poisoned."

"Good lord, that's unthinkable. He was such a decent man. What a stinking world. Well, Mr. Lamenthe's will is as simple as a rich man's last testament can be. He made three bequests: fifty thousand to his secretary, Ruth Jones; twenty-five thousand to his road manager, Joseph Norville; and ten thousand to his business manager, Paul Brietenfeld. The rest of the estate goes to his brother Alex-

ander, who lives in Montreal, Canada. That's it."

"How big is the estate?"

The lawyer shrugged. "I have no idea. You would have to talk to Brietenfeld or his accountants. Ferdinand never told me."

"You called him a rich man."

"I'm assuming, considering all his years at the top of his profession, his high-volume record sales, every concert sold out for the past twenty years, television. Also, you don't usually make bequests of that size without having a lot more."

As the partners stood up, the lawyer said, "I don't know if it's important, but Ferdinand called me on Thursday. I assume you know he was engaged and was planning to marry in about four months. He was going to include his intended in the will, which was definitely carrying hot coals to hell—his fiancée was Anita Colton. I know you've heard *that* name locally."

Schott whistled. "Colton Industries, Colton Tower, the Colton Museum, Colton half the city?"

"The same. Anita is an only child. She could probably buy Rhode Island on one credit card limit."

Schott telephoned Ruth Jones and asked her to meet them at the Park Adams. The promised rain finally came during the

drive to the staid old building as the partners discussed strategy. They decided to keep the poisoned capsule to themselves.

Whalen said, "But what about Ms. Jones? She's the eyes and ears of this case, so we'll have to confide in her, but we can't rule her out as a suspect."

Schott looked out the rain-spattered window. "Her reaction seems so genuine, unless she's putting Meryl Streep to shame."

Whalen pondered. "I agree. We need her, so what the hell."

Ruth Jones was waiting in the Park Adams lobby. At E flat Whalen ripped down the yellow crime-scene tape. Ms. Jones unlocked the door, tearing the crime-scene form that was glued over the door and jamb. When she had walked a few feet into the living room, she suddenly froze in mid-step, staring at the tape outline on the carpet in front of the sofa where the victim had died. She turned quickly and walked toward a window.

"Perhaps we could talk in another room, Ms. Jones," Whalen said. She nodded jerkily and led them into her small office, off the dining room, where she sat down behind her desk. Schott sat on the only other chair, Whalen stood leaning a shoulder against the door frame.

Schott said, "Ms. Jones, what we are about to discuss is ab-

solutely confidential. Understood?"

The secretary looked back and forth between them, nodding, seemingly indifferent.

"What sort of medication did Mr. Lamenthe take?"

"Ferdinand didn't take medication."

"He took no medicine in capsule form?"

Ms. Jones had started to shake her head when a look of understanding came over her somber features. "Oh, you mean the Benadryl. I never think of that as medication, something one takes on a regular basis. Ferdinand took Benadryl as needed for his allergies."

"Is the Benadryl here now?"

"I imagine it's on top of the dresser in Ferdinand's bedroom. He usually kept it there except when he left the flat. He never knew when his allergies would give him difficulty breathing. And of course he always took it with him to concerts. The backstage in auditoriums and concert halls always seems to be quite dusty. Why?"

Whalen stepped out from the doorway. "Please show us."

The master bedroom was furnished expensively, with taste and style. The medication was indeed on top of the dresser. Whalen eyed the container. "It's full. The label has Tuesday's date."

"That's right," Ms. Jones said. "Ferdinand told me he was almost out of the Benadryl and I should renew his prescription, which I did. The pharmacy delivered that on Tuesday afternoon. I put it there on the dresser as always. Oh my. Do you think the poison was in one of Ferdinand's capsules? Is that what this is about?"

"It was in a capsule, yes," Schott said. "I thought Benadryl was over-the-counter."

"Those are fifty milligrams. That's prescription."

"How long was Mr. Lamenthe here last night before he joined the others?"

"Perhaps twenty-five or thirty minutes. He took long showers."

"And how long to get here from the auditorium?"

"Ten minutes."

Schott nodded at Whalen. "Thirty to forty-five minutes. He took the capsule either just before he left Symphony Hall or in the taxi or right after he got here. Drinking the wine just before the poison kicked in was a coincidence."

Whalen turned to the secretary. "Same question as before, Ms. Jones. Who came to this flat from the time you placed the medication here on the dresser until last night?"

"Well, no one Tuesday. Wednesday Paul Brietenfeld stopped by to pick up some papers. We

chatted for about twenty minutes. As he was leaving, Salvatore Massaro arrived to tune the piano. He would have tuned it every two weeks as long as Ferdinand was home."

"Did either of them have occasion to come into this room, perhaps to use the bathroom?"

"No. There's a half-bath in the alcove off the living room. No one ever used Ferdinand's bathroom."

"Who else?" Whalen asked as he penned notes.

"Thursday, well, yesterday morning Ferdinand and Joseph Norville got back. Joseph stayed about half an hour. He was due back later in the afternoon for a meeting. Ferdinand went to a two o'clock meeting at his record company, and at three, Dennis Locksley-Hampton arrived. He had a meeting with Ferdinand and Joseph at four o'clock but came early. He was Ferdinand's European tour promoter; they were going over the upcoming itinerary."

"Any reason this man came so early?"

Ms. Jones's complexion was so ashen her blush was accented. "Dennis came to see me. This is so difficult. It seems he has developed an affection for me that I assure you is not returned. We've had lunch and dinner a few times and went once to the zoo. For the past two years he

has been pursuing that notion, mainly from England. Several times he's asked me to marry him. The last time, six months ago, I thought I had made it quite clear that I wasn't interested, but he didn't give up easily. This time was no different. He asked, and I refused. I'm afraid I said some rather cruel things to him that I now regret. That's all."

"Could any of the men who were here have gone into the kitchen for, say, a glass of water and slipped in here? Is there a way where you wouldn't have seen them? It would only take seconds to add a capsule to that container, or steal one."

Ms. Jones looked through an open door that led to a short hallway. "Yes, there is a way. I suppose that could have happened, and I wouldn't remember anything as ordinary as a trip to the kitchen for water. That's the truth. I never lie. And when Mr. Massaro was tuning, I was in my office with the door closed. Mr. Massaro going *bing, bing, bing* for two hours is quite annoying."

"I have a thought," Whalen mumbled to Schott. He took out a handkerchief, carefully picked up the container, and opened it, spilling the pink and white capsules onto the dresser top. He used his pen to push them aside. "Yes indeed. Fifty-two.

The label indicates fifty. Can you tell us about the two extra ones, Ms. Jones?"

"When Ferdinand got back, they were probably left over from the last bottle, and he just added them to the new batch."

"And then someone added another. Or maybe there were three left, and one of them was the deadly dose. There could have been more than one rigged capsule. You said Mr. Lamenthe always took the medication to his concerts. Where would he leave it while he played?"

"In his dressing room."

"Who of the people here last night were also backstage during the concert?"

"Well, myself, Joseph Norville, of course. And Dennis Locksley-Hampton. Paul Brientfeld and Ms. Colton were in the audience and came backstage after the performance."

"It could have been done on tour as well. Who went on that tour, Ms. Jones?"

The secretary glared. "That's absurd. There were only Joseph Norville and myself. And Ms. Colton joined us for a few days." The partners noted a hint of distaste in her tone when she mentioned the fiancée's name. "Let me think. She was with us in Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, and Eugene. About ten days."

"When was that?"

"A month ago."

"When were they going to be married?"

Ms. Jones's eyes narrowed as she gazed at a far wall. "February. Their honeymoon was to be Ferdinand's three month European tour."

Whalen nudged the capsules into the container, dropped it into a clear plastic evidence bag, and stuffed it into his coat pocket. "Ms. Jones, may my partner and I have a minute alone, please? We'll come to your office when we're done."

Without a word the secretary left the bedroom. Whalen had an idea, which he outlined to Schott, who, as usual, agreed. He had learned that his partner's ideas were for the most part sound and, if nothing else, almost always interesting.

Back in the office Whalen said, "We need a favor, Ms. Jones. Can you call the three men who were here last night and have them come here tomorrow morning at eleven o'clock? Tell them it's a police matter, and they won't refuse. We would like you here, too."

"Ms. Colton was also here last night."

"We won't need her tomorrow, but we'll want her phone number. We're going to see her when we leave."

Ms. Jones's disappointment was evident. "Then she isn't a suspect?"



"Do you think she should be? Can you think of a motive she might have had for murdering Mr. Lamenthe?"

Ms. Jones hesitated, then reached for the telephone and Rolodex. Whalen said, "Remember, not a hint about the capsules."

That Anita Colton occupied the penthouse apartment in Colton Tower came as no surprise to the partners, but their second look at her was as startling as their first had been the night before. Tall, full-figured, and beautiful, her ash-blonde hair worn shoulder length, she was at least twenty-five years younger than her late betrothed.

Her manner was subdued as she led the detectives into her living room and seated them in uncomfortable Danish modern chairs. Whalen shifted his weight several times before he found his seat tolerable, barely. Ms. Colton crossed her legs and folded her hands on her lap. "Any news?"

"Not yet," Whalen replied. "Sorry to bother you at a time like this. We have only a few questions to ask you."

"Dear lord, am I a suspect in Ferdinand's death?"

"Not at all, but perhaps you can help us."

"Any way I can. I loved Ferdinand very much. He had become

my life, you know. Now I—" She looked away, close to tears.

Schott opened his notebook. "Ms. Colton, did Mr. Lamenthe ever say anything to you about problems he might be having with someone? In other words, an enemy?"

She thought for a moment. "No, never. Ferdinand was wonderful. So well-liked by all who knew him. He never mentioned problems of any sort."

"Maybe financial concerns? Someone stealing? Playing games with the books?"

"No. I know he had complete faith in the people who worked for him. He said as much several times."

"One last question. Ruth Jones didn't seem to approve of your engagement to Mr. Lamenthe. Is there some reason for that, or are we imagining things?"

Ms. Colton tried to smile and failed. "I'm afraid Ms. Jones has a bad case of hero worship. Ferdinand had many female friends over the years, and he told me Ms. Jones never approved of any of them. She didn't believe any of us were good enough for her idol. It was a shame, really, but would have made no difference. If we'd been married, she could still have worked for Ferdinand and ignored me. I could have lived with her disapproval."

The partners stood up. As Ms.

Colton showed them out, she paused. "Detective, which direction are you taking when you leave here?"

"North on Beeks Boulevard. Why?"

"My car is being repaired, and my father has his car and driver off running errands. Could you give me a ride—I have some things to buy for the funeral."

"Our pleasure. Where do you want to go?"

She waved vaguely. "Oh, just let me off uptown. I have several shops to go to. I'll say when."

Back at police headquarters Whalen dropped the medication container off in forensics with instructions and a rush request.

When he got to the homicide squad room, Schott was tidying his desk before heading home. Without looking up he said, "Frank, we're not going to solve this case unless we get unearthly lucky. Prints on that capsule bottle won't help. Ruth Jones's prints could be there because she put the container on the dresser. Other prints? Suppose last night the dead man was in his dressing room and asked someone to pass him the medication. At least that's what they could claim, and we couldn't prove otherwise. Because of the colors I think the nasty capsule was one of his, and it could have been taken almost any time or place, doctored, and put back.

One of the three who were backstage could have slipped into his dressing room while he was performing. Otherwise, we have only an over-the-counter poison and no apparent motive in the bunch."

"I agree, though there might be a motive out there we can find. Maybe the financial picture is flawed or one of the three people who were left bequests needs that money badly. And we can't forget the brother in Canada. We have a long way to go, Leo. But we can eliminate. Ms. Colton had everything to lose and nothing to gain. I don't think murder is the way she would break an engagement. Also Brietenfeld. First, he wasn't on the tour. He could have gotten a capsule when he visited the flat Wednesday but not put it back. When the concert was over last night and he went backstage, I'm sure there were a lot of people around."

"He was around Lamenthe enough that he could've been aware of the color of the capsules. On Wednesday he could have come prepared. And he manipulated the big bucks."

"Okay, he's still on the table but near the edge. That leaves Norville, the secretary, and the Englishman backstage during the performance. I know—it might have been left over from the tour. That's Norville and

the secretary, who we agree is unlikely. There's always tomorrow, partner. Let's go home."

**S**aturday morning the partners drove to the Park Adams in a downpour punctuated with thunder so loud they were repeating themselves.

Whalen folded the sheet of paper he had been reading and slid it into his pocket. "Okay, so all the rest of the capsules were clean. Only Lamenthe's prints were on the container except for one small partial that might be Ruth Jones's, which is all right. Want to hear what I think?"

"Sure."

"The killer figured we'd discover the method of introducing the poison but didn't care. He's sure we can't prove he did it."

"Or she."

"What?"

"Or she."

"Right. So that leaves motive. To the Englishman Lamenthe was no doubt the goose that laid the golden you-know-what, but who knows? Ms. Jones seems to have idolized him; again, we'll see. That leaves the finance whiz and the man who handled the money on tours. And my guess is, if that's the way it is, those tracks have been well covered. So what have we got. Means? The poisoned capsule is going to be impossible to trace.

Opportunity to slip the capsule into the container? Everyone involved had opportunity at one time or another. All we have left of the big three is motive, and a solid motive alone never convicted anyone, assuming we discover one. I think we're in big trouble and that many influential people are going to be disappointed in us."

"Maybe this morning will work. This is the first time we've tried group interrogation. Don't forget to ask Jones about the brother. He could be a partner in crime. And, please, no Maxwell Smart. It's embarrassing."

"I promise."

The partners had arranged to meet Ms. Jones early, before the three men arrived. At ten fifteen they gathered in her office in E flat.

Schott cleared his throat. "Now that you've had time to think, have you come up with anyone, even remote, who might have wanted to harm Mr. Lamenthe?"

The secretary looked down at the floor, slowly shaking her head. Faint touches of makeup made her look more alive than she had the day before, but there was still ample evidence of her extreme grief and physical distress. "No. Ferdinand never harmed a soul. Loved, respected, admired—all those

words genuinely applied to him."

"Tell us about the brother in Canada. Could he need money? He's the principal beneficiary of Mr. Lamenthe's will."

Ruth Jones smiled ruefully. "Alexander doesn't need money. He's in the construction business. Skyscrapers, bridges, a baseball stadium, who knows what all. He's very rich."

"They got along?"

"Oh yes. They talked on the phone often and visited twice a year. Alexander was here six months ago, and Ferdinand was planning to spend Thanksgiving in Montreal. He was going to introduce Ms. Colton to her future brother-in-law." Ms. Jones looked as if she'd had a sudden bout of indigestion.

The three men arrived singly, shortly before eleven, and the group interrogation started on time. After twenty minutes of conversation the partners realized the idea wasn't working. They noticed not one raised eyebrow, covert glance, innuendo, or protest over anything said about the dead man or anyone's relationship with him. Everyone was in complete agreement that he was head and shoulders above godliness and deeply mourned by all.

They took Paul Brietenfeld into Ms. Jones's office. The business manager was short and fat,

jowly and pale, the even chestnut brown of his hair no doubt coming from a bottle.

Brietenfeld and Schott sat down, Whalen once again holding up the door frame. Schott decided not to waste time with niceties, saying curtly, "When will there be an accounting of Mr. Lamenthe's financial holdings, sir?"

Brietenfeld looked momentarily startled by Schott's abruptness. "As they say in the music business, detective, take five. If you suspect me, you're shooting blanks. Yesterday when I got over my shock I ordered an audit of the estate with the leading accounting firm in this city and had all the documentation delivered. By Friday I can turn over the result. I assure you the estate is in perfect order."

"How large is the estate?"

"Eight to nine million. If Ferdinand had been a rock star, it would be ten or twenty times that."

"What about Joseph Norville? He handled money on the tours."

"Credit cards and his accounting were always to the penny. Ferdinand paid top wages for total honesty and wouldn't tolerate anything less. And he always checked the tour accountings, every one. Trust me, Joe Norville is honesty itself."

Whalen said, "How many clients do you have?"

"Ten and, yes, Ferdinand was the most profitable for me." Brietenfeld's voice grew soft as he passed a shaking hand across his forehead. "More important, he was a dear friend, and that says it all."

"And you have no idea who might have poisoned him?"

"Then it *was* the wine. No, Ferdinand had no enemies that I know of. I would find it difficult to believe he had an enemy, period."

Joseph Norville was tall and lean with a pointed face and friendly eyes. Thursday night Whalen had remarked to Schott that the tour manager looked like a congenial sparrow. Norville refused a seat, leaning against the wall instead.

"Mr. Norville," said Schott, "who do you think killed Mr. Lamenthe? Any ideas?"

Norville looked from one of them to the other, his mouth drooping. "No. I'd swear on a witness stand that there was not one person who would do that to Ferdinand. God. I read in the papers it was poison. In that gross wine, right?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I noticed Ruth pour him a glass of wine. Then when he made that godawful noise I looked. He stood up and dropped the glass to grab himself. You know, I had bad vibes all day Thursday, and now I know why.

I'm sorry, I can't help you. I sincerely wish I could, but I haven't a clue."

Dennis Locksley-Hampton was every casting director's ideal middle-aged English aristocrat—tall and portly, his hair and thick mustache sandy, his features full and ruddy. On a sunny day his toothy smile would blind.

Yes, of the twenty or so artists he promoted in Europe the dead man was the most celebrated and most profitable. Yes, the dead man was also a close friend. And no, the loss of income was not important compared with the loss of the man.

Whalen said, "And no idea who might have done this terrible thing?"

The Englishman's hesitation was obvious, causing the partners to glance at each other. Finally Locksley-Hampton said, "Certainly not. If I did, I would surely have told you before now. That is by way of being an insult, gentlemen. However, considering the pressure you must be under, I shall let it slide."

"Bloody decent of you, old chap," Whalen mumbled and was rewarded with a look of amused disbelief from his partner.

The room was silent for a minute before Schott said, "Sir, do they have laws in your country about hindering a police in-

vestigation, withholding evidence, aiding and abetting a felony, like that? We do here, all punishable by jail time. Lots of it."

"We saw your hesitation, your look," Whalen added. "You know something, and you'd better do yourself a favor and tell us. If you don't, and we find out, you'll get an all-expenses-paid vacation at a place not of your choosing."

The Englishman clasped his hands between his knees and hung his head briefly. When he looked up, his distress was evident. "Tell me one thing. Was the poison in one of Ferdinand's allergy capsules? And please tell me I am wrong."

"Why do you think it might have been?" Whalen asked.

"Then it *was* in a capsule. I wouldn't allow myself to believe it."

"Who told you it was?" Schott asked, leaning forward over the desk.

"Ruth."

"Did she tell you yesterday when she called or this morning?"

"Neither. She told me Thursday night."

"The night of the *murder*?" Whalen almost shouted.

The Englishman hung his head, nodding. "When he was pronounced dead, Ruth got hysterical and quite physical. We

were all afraid she might hurt herself. The doctor gave her ample sedation, and Ms. Colton and I put her on the bed in the spare room. I stayed to comfort her. I, well, I love her. I'm certain you would have found out. After the medication took effect, she began talking as if she were in a trance. She said she was there all the time for Ferdinand and he never recognized that fact, that he never realized how good she would be for him as his wife. Then she said if he wanted to treat her like one of the potted plants she would treat him like a weed, and now no one would have him. Finally she said something about weedkiller in a capsule, and that she was sorry. It was a mistake, and she didn't want to live without him."

"That's surprising," Schott said thoughtfully. "We were told she hero-worshipped him and that he was her idol. No one mentioned love."

Locksley-Hampton looked up across the desk. "My good man, she was passionately in love with Ferdinand. Had been from the day she met him and admitted it, at least to me. I'm surprised everyone didn't notice. That's why I arrived early on Thursday. When I learned that Ferdinand was to be married, I thought the competition was eliminated. Not so. I proposed once again, but she was ada-

mant in her refusal. As a matter of fact, she was painfully precise with her reasons why she would never marry me. I would rather forget that phase of our conversation."

"Well, I'll be damned," Whalen muttered. "Please join the others, sir, but not a word to them. We need a few minutes."

When they were alone, Schott telephoned the morgue and spoke for several minutes. When he hung up, he said, "Chopper isn't in today. That was his assistant. He checked the Lamenthe file and confirmed that certain weedkillers would have done the job and test the same."

Ruth Jones sat down and gazed at Schott. If she was nervous, it wasn't apparent.

Schott's tone was quiet and affable. "You were very good, Ms. Jones. Excellent. When we told you the poison was in a capsule, we really thought you were surprised."

"Of course I was surprised. Like everyone else I assumed it was the wine."

"Come on, make this easy on yourself. You knew a rigged capsule did the job. Does weedkiller ring a bell?"

"What does that mean, weedkiller?"

"Thursday night, before the sedation knocked you out, you

told someone you had filled one of Mr. Lamenthe's capsules with weedkiller. If you couldn't have him, no one would."

The secretary made small fists. "That's insane. It's also impossible."

"You were in dreamland."

"It's impossible because I didn't do what you claim and did not have that knowledge about a capsule. I couldn't give information I didn't know."

"You were in love with your employer, correct?"

Ms. Jones's face twisted as tears filled her eyes. "Yes, I loved him with all my heart, and I would never have harmed him. Damn, detective, think. If I were the type to kill, which I certainly am not, I would have killed Ms. Colton. *That* would make sense. What did I gain by Ferdinand's death but the loss of the only man I will ever love?"

"He was going to be married. That would have been the end of your dream."

"I still could have taken care of him, been near him. That has sustained me all these years and would have continued to do so. Now that he's gone I have nothing. No life."

From behind her Whalen said, "You wanted to be his wife, and he was about to marry another woman. Your abiding fantasy was dead. As my part-



ner said, if you couldn't be Mrs. Lamenthe, no one would."

Ruth Jones started to speak, then closed her mouth and gazed at a corner of the ceiling, her pale features registering a number of emotions. In time she lowered her stare, and for the first time since the partners had met her, a sad smile teased the corners of her mouth.

"I only told him the truth. I always do. I never lie. And the truth must have hurt him deeply. So deeply he would do this to me."

"Who?"

"Dennis. He told you that story about my talking about weed-killer. It had to be him. He stayed with me until I went to sleep."

She seemed to gain a measure of composure. "I'll give you something to consider, detectives. I couldn't have possibly said what he claimed, since I didn't know. But suppose Dennis had decided to eliminate Ferdinand as a rival, on the mistaken assumption that I would then marry him? He brought the poisoned capsule with him and put it in the container shortly after he arrived here. When I then, to put an end to his nonsense, told him many unpleasant truths about himself, as reasons why I would never marry him under any circumstances, he decided to leave the capsule and tell you that story. If

I hadn't been conveniently sedated, he would have found another way."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "He must hate me so very much. And you can see he had a motive. With Ferdinand dead, he believed he could have me. When I was painfully clear that that wouldn't happen, he must have decided on revenge against me. Punish me terribly twice, first by killing my beloved and then by having me blamed for it. Since I know I didn't do it, that's the only logical explanation."

Whalen said, "The problem with it is that Mr. Lamenthe might not have taken a capsule, or that particular capsule, on Thursday night. He could have taken it another day when Dennis wouldn't have been around to hear your alleged confession."

"He would have thought of another story to point you in my direction."

"Do you remember leaving him alone when he was here on Thursday, or his going to the kitchen?" asked Schott.

"I can't honestly say I do. No. But he must have."

Whalen came around to stand alongside the desk facing Ruth Jones. "You've given us something to ponder, Ms. Jones. Join the others now, please, but don't say anything to Mr. Locksley-Hampton. Let us sort this out.

And ask Mr. Norville to come in."

When she had left, Schott said, "Why Norville?"

"A hunch."

The road manager was certain and quick in response to the questions. Yes, Dennis had complained of not feeling well. Blamed it on his dinner. He went into Ferdinand's dressing room halfway through the first half of the performance and didn't come out until after intermission. Yes, Ferdinand always left his Benadryl on his dressing table. Sometimes he needed it handy between halves. Yes, he did happen to know that Ferdinand had two capsules left when he got home. On the plane he'd taken one, then looked into the container and mentioned that he had only two left and he hoped Ruth had remembered to refill his prescription.

Schott said, "Did you happen to see him take a capsule Thursday night? Perhaps at the hall."

Norville shifted his feet and looked at each partner in turn. "As a matter of fact, he took a capsule after he got home here. Ruth got it for him. Why?"

Whalen stood up straighter, his eyes narrow. "Elaborate on that, please."

"We got here, and Ferdinand went into his bedroom. He came back out a moment later minus

his overcoat, saying he wanted to ask Dennis something about the upcoming tour before he forgot. They talked for a minute or so; then Ferdinand put his hand on his chest. He was wheezing a bit. He said something about damned dusty backstage and asked Ruth to get him a Benadryl, which she did. She also brought a glass of water, and he took the capsule right there in front of everybody."

Whalen pointed at his partner, smiling. "Clean living pays off every time." He slid some folded papers out of his coat pocket and sorted through them until he found the one he wanted. He flipped it open, read briefly, and smiled again. He put that paper into one pocket and the rest into another. "Let's join the others, gentlemen—and not a word, Mr. Norville."

Brietenfeld and Locksley-Hampton were seated on either end of a sofa, Ruth Jones in a chair to one side. Norville and Schott stood slightly behind Whalen, who looked down at the secretary.

"Ms. Jones, when we told you about the capsule, why didn't you tell us that Mr. Lamenthe had taken a capsule here after the concert? That you had given it to him?"

The secretary waved a hand. "I forgot. Goodness, detective, that was simply part of my job.

I must have done that a thousand times for him."

Brietenfeld said, "What about the capsule?"

Norville and the Englishman simply stared at Ruth Jones.

"What were you wearing on Thursday night, Ms. Jones?"

"I—let me think."

Locksley-Hampton said, "A royal blue pants suit and pale blue ruffled blouse." All the men turned to look at him. He hung his head, blushing.

Whalen said, "Are there pockets in that pants suit? Is that where you had the poison capsule? Or maybe in the back of a desk drawer?"

The secretary's eyes opened wide. "What *are* you saying? I got the capsule from the container on Ferdinand's dresser."

"No, you didn't, Ms. Jones." Whalen pulled the paper from his pocket and opened it. "This is a report from our forensics lab on the container and capsules. If you had done what you just said, you would have been the last person to touch the container.

And you would have had to hold it tightly because it has a child-proof cap. Your fingerprints would have been on it, but our lab didn't find your prints, only Mr. Lamenthe's. No, you never went near the container. You left this room, got a glass of water, and gave it to him along with the capsule you had prepared. I think maybe you had it with you and were going to put it in the container at the concert hall, but Mr. Locksley-Hampton was in the dressing room and didn't come out until after you left at intermission." Whalen's tone turned sadly gentle. "It's all over, Ms. Jones. You did it."

The secretary stared round-eyed at each man in turn and buried her face in her hands, her sobs loud and raspy.

Whalen turned to Schott, screwing up his face as he did his Maxwell Smart. "The old no-fingerprints-on-the-murder-weapon ploy, Ninety-nine."

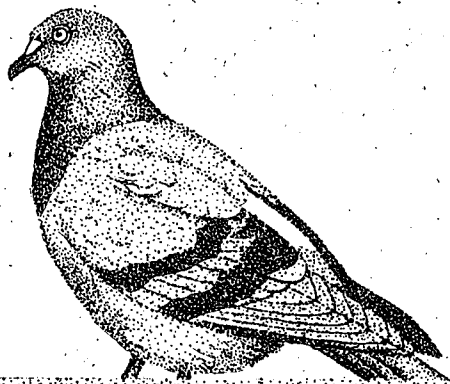
Schott looked pained. "You promised."

Whalen grinned. "Oops."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# THE PIGEON ON THE SILL

Herman Landon



*Illustration by David Monette*

*Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 2/98*

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“If you want solitude,” said Major Briggs, stroking a mustache whose crispness had survived his active military career, “you ought to try Cedar Cove. The place aches with solitude. I ought to know. Stuck it out for six summers.”

Thomas Maurice Webb wanted particulars. Major Briggs swallowed a pepsin tablet and expatiated deprecatingly on the secluded character of Cedar Cove.

“If unmitigated isolation is what you want,” he concluded, “the place is yours for as long as you can stand it. As for me, though, I wouldn’t be found dead in a place like that.”

So it came about that Thomas Maurice Webb gathered together a few necessities, including Madam Katoo and his priceless man Knobbetts, and went out to a rockstrewn and unlovely section of shorefront to write his *Memoirs of a Diplomat*. It did not occur to him that there might have been an unconscious note of prophecy in the major’s adverse comment on Cedar Cove as a place in which to be found dead. His digestion was excellent, his heart sound, his blood pressure normal, and his only apparent worry was a stepson who was going to the devil as fast as legs could carry him. Moreover, his chief reason, although not his ostensible one, for going to Cedar Cove was that he did not wish to be found dead for a long time yet.

He looked a little frail, yet he was a man of much dignity. You could easily picture him in silk knee-breeches and other court trappings, comporting himself with utmost ease while being received in audience by a majesty. Strong features, an erect bearing, gray hair that looked as if it had been combed in anger, a bit of swagger, and a touch of arrogance combined to give him a distinguished air. The cool and deliberate nature of great minds was his. Anecdotes gathered about his personality like moths about a bright light, some of them true, all of them believable. It was related, for instance, that one dark night, while recuperating at a watering place in Florida, he had been accosted by a footpad on a dark highway.

“Please don’t shoot,” Mr. Webb had said. “I am here for my health.”

The footpad, governed by Heaven only knew what mysterious sentiments, had slunk away. Mr. Webb, still in possession of his watch and wallet, had continued his stroll. His heart might have jostled his Adam’s apple for a minute, but nobody knew that part of the story.

Neither did anybody know that Mr. Webb slid an old army revolver into the double bottom of one of the bags after Knobbetts had packed his luggage preparatory to their departure for Cedar Cove. Arrived there, he kept it in his desk by day and under his pillow at night. Neither did Knobbetts know how carefully his master had guarded the secret of their destination so that only Major Briggs knew their whereabouts. It did not occur to him that their arrival at Cedar Cove coincided almost to a day with Jimmie Garrett's release from the penitentiary. And there were many other things Knobbetts did not know. His master's habit, for instance, of examining the fastenings of doors and windows late at night, long after his supposed retirement. And the even more astonishing custom of always looking under the bed before he crawled in between the sheets. It was by such secrecy that Thomas Maurice Webb remained a hero to his valet.

He had his eccentricities; of course. Knobbetts understood all great men had them. He was a hard man, severe and domineering and inexorably just in matters of wrongdoing, yet it was this same Thomas Maurice Webb who had picked up a maimed kitten on the street one day and nursed it back to health. A man of contradictions, certainly. And Knobbetts knew only half of it.

Madam Katoo, had there been a reasoning brain beneath her russet crest, might have got an inkling of the other half. Perhaps she would have indulged in a derisive cackle or two upon learning that Thomas Maurice Webb was a fraud and a poseur. She was alone with him at night, saw him pace the floor with his nervous strut, saw him look under the bed and into the clothes closet, heard him mumble to himself occasionally; and she might have deduced that he was afflicted with such a morbid dread of loneliness that even a cockatoo offered agreeable company. A dog would have seemed a more natural companion for a lonely man, but the trouble with dogs was that they understood too much. You couldn't fool them very well. They knew by instinct whether a man was as composed and intrepid as he tried to appear, or a coward at heart.

It was Madam Katoo who, in the evening of the day following their arrival at Cedar Cove, got a glimpse of Mr. Webb's hidden self as he sat reading a newspaper in his improvised study. The house in its entirety was of noble lines and dimensions for a summer dwelling and showed many traces of former dignity, but the ground floor room in which Mr. Webb sat was narrow and low-ceiled with many sprawling cracks in the wall plaster and furnished only with

a desk, two chairs, Madam Katoo's cage, and a bad picture of a young woman dipping water from a stream. The desk was in the center beneath a hanging oil lamp, and if Mr. Webb should look up and glance out the window, he would see only a huge gnarled oak outside and, a few yards beyond it, an old barn that obstructed all further view. Between the barn and the house was a broad driveway of cobblestones which swerved sharply just outside the window and wound up at the front entrance.

An obscure item of news was absorbing Mr. Webb's attention. It stated that James Garrett, adopted son of Thomas Maurice Webb, whose achievements in the diplomatic service were still fresh in the public mind, had just been released from the penitentiary, his original sentence of seven years for grand larceny having been cut in half by the board of pardons. Asked by a reporter what he intended doing now that he was free again, Garrett had made facetious reply.

"Oh, I crave a bit of excitement after being walled in so long. Maybe I'll go tiger hunting for a while."

Just a bit of flippancy, to all appearance. Thousands who read the item would see nothing else in the statement. But Mr. Webb's mind turned back a number of years, to the time when Jimmie had nicknamed him Old Tiger. That was before Jimmie had started to turn out bad. Afterward he had spurned his stepfather's discipline along with his name. By quick stages the young scapegrace had gone from bad to worse, and from worse to prison. It was partly due to Mr. Webb's stern sense of justice that he had gone there. Jimmie's last words to him before they took him away had been:

"Someday I'll get you for this, Old Tiger."

There had been a thin blaze of hate in his eyes as he said it. And Mr. Webb imagined there had been a blaze of hate in Jimmie's heart as he made that statement to the reporter. There was a strained look in his face. Yes, he was afraid of Jimmie Garrett. He was afraid of many things, though no living soul suspected it—of the sea, of fires, of motorcars, of burglars, of the dark, of earthquakes, of pestilence, of poverty, and of death. It was rarely he had a moment's peace. Fear in one form or another was always with him. Yet it was a peculiar kind of fear, something that Mr. Webb himself couldn't explain. It didn't seem to come from any tangible menaces. The thing he feared most seemed to be fear itself, something that shook and shamed him even while he fought against it.

It was so with respect to Jimmie Garrett. He did not fear violence or death at Jimmie's hands, but he feared he would not be able to



look death in the face without quavers. Something like that, anyhow. That was why, on the pretext that he needed solitude to write his memoirs, he had gone into hiding at Cedar Cove. Gone into hiding! He smiled ironically. That was the humiliating truth, suspected by no man, not even by Knobbetts, who was a faithful and versatile sort and invaluable in a place like this, even though Mr. Webb suspected that he sometimes made faces behind his back.

"Hello, Tom."

The screechy salutation made Mr. Webb start sharply. Madam Katoo was one of the few living beings in the habit of addressing him so familiarly. He looked about him with bewilderment. The cage was empty and the door stood ajar. Madam Katoo herself, her bright crest and gay plumage vivified by the rays of the setting sun, sat pertly on a limb of the oak just outside the window, viewing the former diplomat with a dapper and roguish mien. At once he understood what had happened. The fastenings of the cage door must have given way to continuous strain.

"Come here," he directed sternly. "Come here instantly."

"Go to hell," said Madam Katoo.

Mr. Webb frowned. He suspected Knobbetts had added that forceful phrase to the cockatoo's scant vocabulary. He coaxed and bullied, but the bird was obstinate. The world was hers, and she knew it. But as soon as the former diplomat had exhausted all his diplomacy, she flew demurely back to her cage.

When Knobbetts called him to dinner a few minutes later, Mr. Webb was once more his composed and imperturbable self. In the days that followed he devoted himself with greater energy to his memoirs. The beneficent effects of the simple life told in clearer eyes and steadier nerves. Even Madam Katoo, now at liberty to roam at her pleasure between the cage and the oak, since she had demonstrated that she had no great wanderlust, might have remarked that his secret worries seemed to be departing. After all, Mr. Webb sometimes reflected, it was extremely unlikely that Jimmie Garrett would find him here.

But one afternoon Knobbetts brought disturbing tidings. A tramp of decidedly unfavorable aspect had invaded their privacy. The vagabond had spent last night in the barn, and now he was sunning himself on a nearby ledge of rock.

"Why don't you tell him to move on?" asked Mr. Webb.

"I did, sir, but he won't."

Mr. Webb glanced involuntarily at the desk drawer that contained

his revolver. Then he looked down at his manuscript. A tiny drop of ink had fallen on a half-written page. He blotted it deliberately.

"What does he look like?" he inquired casually.

Knobbetts' description, dealing most with dirt and tatters, was unsatisfactory. Dirt and tatters might hide a Jimmie Garrett. Mr. Webb tried to view the problem with diplomatic calm.

"Feed him and put him to work sawing wood," he directed. "He can sleep in the barn."

Knobbetts summoned courage to voice a gentle protest.

"If you don't mind my saying so—"

"I do," said Mr. Webb sharply.

Knobbetts withdrew. Mr. Webb congratulated himself upon a wise decision. He looked out the window, and soon he saw Knobbetts conduct the tramp toward the woodpile behind the barn. He tried in vain to catch a glimpse of the fellow's face. In a few minutes, however, he heard a series of strident sounds. The tramp had gone to work with the saw. Mr. Webb's little test had succeeded. It was impossible to imagine Jimmie Garrett at work with a saw. The fellow must be just a casual tramp.

But misgivings arose anew when, the following day, Knobbetts reported that the tramp was suffering severely from blisters on his hands.

"Blisters?" said Mr. Webb. A tramp with blisters on his hands? It seemed a bit incongruous. He thought of Jimmie Garrett again. Jimmie's hands would blister very quickly if, by a violent stretch of the imagination, one could imagine him sawing wood.

"Give him a pair of gloves," he directed.

"There's only one pair in the house, sir, the ones you bought before you left town. They're too good for a tramp to wear."

"Then give him a dollar and tell him to walk to the village and buy a pair."

"A dollar, sir?" Knobbetts' frugal soul was in revolt. He looked very much as if he would have preferred to put the dollar in his own pocket. "You can get a good pair of cotton gloves for fifteen cents, sir."

Mr. Webb considered. He was very anxious to inspect the tramp. In the end he dismissed Knobbetts and went himself to the woodpile behind the barn. The tramp sat on a log and looked at his hands with a pained air. He wore a thick stubble of beard, but even if it had been twice as thick a glance would have told Mr. Webb that he had alarmed himself in vain.

His relief rendered him extravagant. He peeled a two dollar bill from a roll, told the tramp to get himself a pair of gloves, adding that he could keep the change.

Then he returned to his desk and was soon absorbed in his work. He scarcely heard Knobbetts coax the old flivver into activity and start on his daily trip to the village for mail and provisions. The hours passed quickly. Noon came, but Knobbetts did not return. Perhaps the flivver, an old rattletrap affair that belonged on the premises, had broken down. Mr. Webb was getting hungry, but he tried to recapture his thoughts and go on with his work.

His thoughts flowed slowly and with interruptions. Soon his pen paused in the middle of a sentence. Three o'clock struck and still no Knobbetts. Mr. Webb's nerves were on edge. He wondered whether the tramp had returned from his trip to the village. With Knobbetts gone, a strange and oppressive feeling seemed to brood over the lonely house. The air was stifling, with an electric quality in it as if a storm were on the way. Madam Katoo sat very still in her cage as if she too felt the depressing influence.

Mr. Webb opened the window, glanced up at a sullen sky, crossed the room a few times, then stopped suddenly at the desk and looked down at the sentence he had left unfinished. Though his eyes were on the writing, he was listening to sounds coming from the outside. There were footsteps, and they had a furtive and disagreeable sound. With a flutter of plumage and a screechy complaint Madam Katoo flew from her cage and perched on a limb of the oak outside. Mr. Webb stood motionless, listening, little tremors jogging up and down his spine.

The footsteps drew nearer; Madam Katoo uttered a few muffled squawks. Still Mr. Webb stood looking down at the unfinished sentence. There was a tightness at his throat, a hammering at his ribs. His hand shook a trifle as he opened the drawer and saw that the revolver was still there.

Now the footfalls were quite close. A shadowy form passed hurriedly in front of the window.

"Jimmie!" came Madam Katoo's screech from her perch in the oak. "Dam' loafer!"

The raucous call rasped on Mr. Webb's taut nerves. Madam Katoo remembered, even after these three and a half years. For days now Jimmie's name would be on her sharp tongue.

Mr. Webb heard the outer door swing on its rusty hinges and close with a slam. He leaned weakly against the desk, trying to still

the tremors of his body and control the fear which he dreaded even more than Jimmie Garrett's vengeance.

Footsteps approached the door, then stopped. There came a fearful pause. Mr. Webb sat down in the chair beside the desk. Why was Jimmie Garrett delaying? Deliberating his mode of attack, perhaps. He stifled an impulse to run. It would be useless, for Jimmie Garrett could run faster. Besides, the impulse to run was a thing of reason only; it didn't come from his heart. He did not want to run away. The moments dragged. A fierce resolution came, smothering all else. Whatever was to happen, he must meet it with the same fraudulent calm—a sort of self-hypnotism it was—with which he had faced dangers in the past.

A hand was fumbling at the knob outside. Mr. Webb straightened up and took the pen in his hand. It shook between his fingers. He threw all the tattered remnants of his nerve force into the shaking hand. The tremors lessened; now the hand was steady. His lips formed a tight smile as he gazed at the now unwavering pen. It was a triumph of mind over quaking body, and it filled him with a grim exaltation.

The door came open. A moment longer he gazed at the pen in his hand. Not the slightest tremor now. The sight gave him added fortitude. He dipped the pen in ink, bent his head over the manuscript, gazed down at the unfinished sentence.

Jimmie Garrett, tall, lean, disheveled, with a pallid strain in his face, stood in the opening. With a smolder in narrowed eyes he looked at the man seated at the desk, the gray head inclined over a sheet of paper, pen poised over his writing.

Mr. Webb looked up. Every nerve and every muscle was taut with a terrific strain, but all Jimmie Garrett saw was a look of mild surprise.

"Oh, you, Jimmie."

The voice was steady. Jimmie Garrett saw no signs of the struggle that rendered it so. Perhaps he had hoped his entrance would create a dramatic surprise. With a look of spite and chagrin he opened his coat, took a small packet from an inner pocket, and flung it contemptuously on the desk.

Mr. Webb picked it up, looked at it, fixed an uncomprehending gaze on Jimmie Garrett.

"Money?"

Jimmie Garrett tossed a few silver coins and two coppers on the desk.

"Seven hundred sixty-four dollars and seven cents," he said.

"Oh!" Mr. Webb was frankly surprised now. "That's the amount you took."

"With interest," said Jimmie Garrett shortly.

Mr. Webb nodded. He counted the money deliberately. His face was a little pale, but his hand showed no quiver as he raked the bills and coins into a drawer.

"You surprise me, Jimmie," he remarked.

Jimmie Garrett shrugged. The sneer on his lips grew more pronounced. The other's apparent composure seemed to bewilder and infuriate him.

"I told you I would return the money," he declared. "I've done it. We are even—as far as the money is concerned."

Mr. Webb nodded matter-of-factly, although the implied threat did not escape him.

"May I inquire where you got it, Jimmie?"

"Borrowed it from a friend. I'd rather be in his debt than in yours."

Mr. Webb searched his face. He recalled that Jimmie had never lied, no matter what else he had done. The young man's eyes were steady despite the smolder that trembled in their depths.

"As you know," said Mr. Webb evenly, "I didn't care about the money. That didn't mean anything. What hurt me was that you had stooped to thievery."

"Hurt you?" Jimmie Garrett's jeering laugh was loud and hoarse. "Hurt you? Why, you have no more human feeling than a buzzard. You threw me in jail over a few hundred dollars."

"It was the law, Jimmie, not I."

"You could have stopped it."

"If you had come to me and confessed, perhaps. I turned the case over to a detective agency. They discovered the truth. Then there was nothing to do but let the law take its course. Your term in prison seems to have done you good."

Again Jimmie Garrett's bitter laugh rang out.

"Yes, it has done you good," Mr. Webb insisted. "Once I thought your pride and your sense of decency were dead. Prison life seems to have revived them. You have proved that by returning the money you stole."

"Oh, don't preach!" Jimmie Garrett snarled. "It makes me sick to hear you. I wouldn't have touched your rotten money if I hadn't been drinking and if I hadn't been in the damndest pinch a man

was ever in. Anyway, I'd rather steal than be a frostbitten old mountebank like you."

Mr. Webb quavered beneath his placid exterior. By returning the money Jimmie Garrett had thrown him into a confusion more demoralizing than fear. He had expected a different sort of scene. This was even more disturbing than open violence. But it would not do to let the young man glimpse the tumult within him. He must hang on to his make-believe imperturbability.

"At any rate," he said without a tremor, "you have proved yourself a man by returning the money. Come and see me at my office when I return to the city. Perhaps we can arrange something. In the meantime, if you need money—"

"I don't."

"Very well, then." Mr. Webb dipped his pen and bent his head over the manuscript. He struck a pose of mental absorption, and he knew it was well done. Now he ran his eyes over the paragraph ending in the unfinished sentence. To complete it with Jimmie Garrett standing there, looking down at him out of his inflamed eyes, would be something of a triumph, a gesture of derision at the horde of fears snapping at his nerves.

He brought his pen to the paper, but the thoughts would not come. Jimmie Garrett's presence was distracting. His silence grew to be maddening. Mr. Webb could stand it no longer. He looked up, then looked quickly down again. What was the meaning of that awful look he had seen in Jimmie Garrett's face? Murder?

His fingers cramped convulsively about the pen. In a moment he had recaptured his spurious calm; the twitching of his fingers ceased. He must erase from his mind the look he had seen in Jimmie Garrett's face. Again he fixed his eyes on the unfinished sentence. He must write something—anything. But what he wrote bore no relation to what went before.

*My adopted son, James Garrett, is here [were the words that fell with surprising smoothness from his pen]. He is in an ugly mood. I believe he contemplates doing me bodily harm.*

His pen paused. A faint smile twitched his lips. Jimmie Garrett could not know what he had written. If the worst should come to pass, if the passion he had seen in Jimmie Garrett's face should explode in an act of murder, then these lines would tell their own story. And people would say that Thomas Maurice Webb had been a

hero indeed. They would praise his iron composure. A man who could indite an accusation against his slayer even while looking death in the face.

A faint chuckle escaped him. They would never guess what a charlatan he had been. And then a dynamic strain in the atmosphere compelled him to look up again. It was growing dark. There were mutters of thunder in the distance. Not for more than a second could he trust himself to look into Jimmie Garrett's terrible face. Then he reached into the drawer, took out the revolver and placed it at his elbow. He steadied his hand, then wrote:

*I am armed. My weapon lies at my elbow. I hope it will act as a deterrent—*

The pen came to a rasping pause. His arm darted out, but it was too late. Jimmie Garrett had flung himself across the desk and snatched the pistol. Looking up, Mr. Webb saw his stepson's face distorted by a horrible grimace. He heard a laugh. Then a small, awful pause. And then a thunderous crack.

## II

"But the cockatoo, Jimmie?" said Mr. Dakin.

"Yes, the cockatoo," said Jimmie Garrett hopelessly.

He looked gloomily about the iron-grilled enclosure in which he sat on a hard bench with his attorney in the Fairfield County jail. Mr. Dakin was a broad, tall man with a soft voice and a soft manner. He was slow of speech and movement, and he looked far from brilliant. Jimmie was drawn to him, but he did not know exactly why. Perhaps one reason was that Mr. Dakin believed him while other lawyers had listened to him with cold incredulity.

"If we could explain what became of the cockatoo," said Mr. Dakin wistfully, "we might convince them that the rest of your story is true. We could make them believe that you went to Cedar Cove that afternoon with no other thought than to throw the money in Mr. Webb's face and tell him what you thought of him."

"It's true," declared Jimmie quietly.

"I know it, and that's the devil of it. Nothing is so hard to make a jury believe as the truth. If it wasn't for the pesky cockatoo we could—"

"And the bullet," Jimmie put in.



"Yes, and the bullet," said Mr. Dakin.

He paused before his client, legs spread wide apart, filling his pipe with white, pudgy fingers. His suit of mousy gray fitted badly. His face was large and soft and sallow. By rigid economy a single lock of hair had been made to cover a goodly portion of skull.

"If we could find the cockatoo and the bullet," he added plaintively, "then we might make the jury swallow the rest."

Jimmie nodded heavily.

"This is how your story will sound," said Mr. Dakin. "You thought Mr. Webb gave you a raw deal. You brooded over it in prison. That part was all right. He was a bit rough with you. A lot of people will sympathize with you there. When you got out of prison, you were like a boiler with its exhaust pipe plugged up. You had to blow off steam or bust. That's all right, too. Anybody can see you're hot-headed. You learned where your stepfather was located by going over Major Briggs's outgoing mail one day and finding a letter bearing Mr. Webb's forwarding address. Then you went to a friend and borrowed eight hundred dollars. You wanted to pay Mr. Webb back before you bawled him out. That's a good touch, Jimmie—about paying back the money. Up to that point your story will get across beautifully."

Mr. Dakin blew smoke through the bars of the iron enclosure.

"But the rest—" He wrinkled his long, florid nose, the only bright feature of his countenance. "The rest is all snags. You found Mr. Webb at his desk. Knobbetts was out. You threw the money down on the desk. A lot of red-hot phrases were blistering the lining of your brain, but you couldn't get 'em out. You were too mad. And the sight of Mr. Webb sitting there as calm as a judge made you all the madder. You wanted to see him wilt and shake, but he didn't even bat an eyelid. He just went on writing as unconcerned as if you hadn't been there. Cool, I'll tell the world! And his coolness made you all the hotter. You wanted to batter down his iron composure, but you couldn't even make a dent in it. It made you furious. You lost control of yourself. You grabbed the revolver and fired a shot, just to see if you couldn't make him jump. But you didn't fire the shot at him. You fired it—think hard, Jimmie. Where did you fire it?"

Jimmie Garrett raised his head, a well-formed young head covered with thick yellow hair. His pale face grew taut with the strain of looking back upon a scene of tumult.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "It happened so quickly, and I must have been a little mad. But I didn't fire the shot at Mr. Webb. I can

swear to that. I seemed to come partly to my senses when I heard the explosion. I ran from the house, fearing I might be tempted to shoot again and—and—"

"And take aim, the second time," Mr. Dakin suggested.

"Yes, something like that. I couldn't trust myself. I just ran like mad, without stopping to look back."

"And you dropped the revolver as you ran?"

"I'm not sure." Jimmie pondered heavily. "I—it seems I threw the revolver out the window just after I fired the shot. But I'm not sure. It all seems like a crazy dream."

"And half an hour later," Mr. Dakin recited, hitching up his sagging trousers, "Knobbetts came home and found Mr. Webb dead on the floor. The revolver, with your fingerprints on the handle and showing that one shot had been recently fired from it, was found outside the window. The cockatoo was gone. The money had disappeared from the desk drawer. On the desk was a sheet of paper in Mr. Webb's handwriting saying you had come to him in an ugly mood and that he feared you were after his life." He made a wry face. "It makes a nice little case for the state."

"Yes," said Jimmie, "and my precious record makes it all the blacker."

"The state will contend," said Mr. Dakin, "that you made away with the cockatoo because she recognized you and you were afraid she would talk. I understand that cockatoo would harp on a person's name for days after she'd seen him. She did recognize you, didn't she?"

"I believe so. I have a faint recollection that she spoke my name as I passed the window."

Mr. Dakin nodded gloomily. "That's where we are up against a hard one. You and I believe that a stranger—maybe the tramp Mr. Webb hired to saw wood—committed the murder soon after you left and took the money. It must have been very soon after, or Mr. Webb would have torn up what he wrote about you. But a stranger would have no motive for doing away with the cockatoo. Not unless he did it with the deliberate intention of throwing the guilt on you."

He sighed. It couldn't be said that Mr. Dakin was bubbling over with cheer. Yet he was not a pessimist. On the contrary, as Jimmie had learned, he was the sort of optimist who has to see the full extent of the gloomy side before he can turn to the bright one.

"Then there is the bullet," he went on. "A bullet was found in Mr. Webb's body. The state will contend that you fired it. We've got to

admit that you fired a shot from Mr. Webb's revolver. There's no getting around that. But we deny that the shot you fired was the fatal one. Now, to uphold our contention, we've got to show what became of the bullet you fired. If it didn't lodge in Mr. Webb's body, it must have lodged somewhere else."

Jimmie stretched his legs and frowned. Time after time he had gone over this point with Mr. Dakin, but it was as baffling as ever.

"I've searched the room in which Mr. Webb was killed," added Mr. Dakin, "and so has the district attorney. There is no sign of a bullet anywhere. That leaves only one explanation. You must have fired the bullet out the window."

"Maybe I did," said Jimmie dully.

"Very probable," said Mr. Dakin. "You threw the revolver out the window. Very likely you fired the bullet in the same direction. We know the window was open that night. But now we come to another snag. It's a narrow window, and you were standing about six feet from it when you fired the shot. That didn't give the bullet a very wide range. I spent all yesterday afternoon experimenting, firing about a hundred shots from an air pistol. I stood exactly where you stood. When I aimed low, they struck the wide cobblestone driveway that runs between the barn and the house. When I aimed high, they struck the eaves of the barn. Whichever way I fired, it was impossible to shoot beyond the barn. So the bullet you fired that night couldn't have gone very far. Yet I searched the entire range and didn't find even a scratch."

With a fretting air he puffed smoke from his pipe.

"There's the riddle," he concluded. "The bullet couldn't strike either the oak, the cobblestones, or the barn without leaving a trace. Neither could it have dissolved in thin air. What became of it?"

"It's three weeks since it was fired," Jimmie observed. "A lot of things could have happened to it in the meantime."

"But the house and grounds were searched five hours after the murder," Mr. Dakin reminded him. "How carefully we don't know. Wish I had been on the case then. But one thing is sure. We've got to find either the cockatoo or the bullet. Both would be better. Without either we're lost."

Jimmie flung his cigarette away. It passed between the iron bars and landed in a brass cuspidor outside.

"Good shot," said Mr. Dakin.

He lowered his head in thought. Minutes passed in silence. A weary jail attendant came down the corridor with a stack of cuspi-

dors under his arm. He carried away the one in which Jimmie's cigarette had fallen. Mr. Dakin followed him with heavy eyes until he was out of sight. Then he fixed the same heavy eyes on the point where the cuspidor had been.

"That's an idea," he mumbled absently.

Jimmie watched him curiously. Mr. Dakin turned slowly and looked at him. His eyes were narrow and contemplative.

"My mind works that way, Jimmie," he explained. "I see things that are farthest from my thoughts, and they start queer ideas in my brain. That cigarette now. You shot it straight into the cuspidor. But it isn't there now. It's gone."

Jimmie gave him a blank look. Mr. Dakin seemed to be stating the obvious thing with a very solemn air.

"It's farfetched," he added, "but maybe the same thing happened to the bullet. You see, it's possible that your bullet lodged in some object that was afterward taken away, just as the cuspidor was taken away. It's just a hunch. But it would explain what became of the bullet."

"But it wouldn't explain what happened to the cockatoo or the money."

"No, it wouldn't. Might be worth thinking about, though. See you again tomorrow, Jimmie."

He placed his big, plump hand on Jimmie's shoulder, called the corridor guard, and walked out. Jimmie was taken back to his cell. He was in a lighter mood. It seemed as though the big and gloomy lawyer's touch on his shoulder had banished a load of worries.

When he returned at eleven o'clock the next morning, there was a hint of excitement beneath Mr. Dakin's rustic exterior.

"Had another hunch last night," he casually announced. "Saw a man with a limp. It started an idea kicking around in my head."

"A man with a limp?"

"He limped pretty badly. It set me wondering whether a bullet had hit him in the leg or the foot at one time."

"Yes?" said Jimmie. He was growing accustomed to the lawyer's queer way of reasoning.

"That started me thinking about the missing bullet again," said Mr. Dakin. He crushed a leaf of tobacco between his great soft hands and filled his pipe. "I also thought about the tramp Mr. Webb put to work sawing wood. I put the two together—the tramp and the bullet. Or, rather, I put the bullet in the tramp."

"Eh?" said Jimmie, very dazed.

"We know the tramp had been around the house that day," Mr. Dakin explained. "Next morning he was gone. Maybe he was seized with wanderlust when Mr. Webb gave him a dollar. Or maybe that dollar gave him a taste for more dollars. Anyhow, maybe he was watching outside the window and saw you throw the money down on the desk. Maybe the bullet you fired landed in some fleshy part of his body. That frightened him, and he ran away. What's wrong with that?"

"By Jove!" Jimmie hoarsely exclaimed. "But in that case wouldn't the tramp have left a trail of blood?"

"A heavy rain started in the evening," Mr. Dakin pointed out. "It may have washed the blood away. I've notified all the hospitals and all the doctors within fifty miles to see if they have any record of a wounded tramp."

Jimmie's face shone a little, but he was not yet convinced.

"But that wouldn't explain who killed Mr. Webb," he remarked.

"No, but it would tend to prove that you didn't. If your bullet lodged in the tramp's anatomy, it couldn't have killed Mr. Webb."

"And what about the cockatoo?"

"One thing at a time," said Mr. Dakin. He looked a little hurt over his client's failure to embrace the theory with greater enthusiasm. "Had a talk with Knobbetts this morning. It's queer nobody seems to have thought of Knobbetts in connection with this case."

"You don't think he killed Mr. Webb?"

"Well, there is just this about it, Jimmie. The cockatoo disappeared the night of the murder. The only sane explanation is that the murderer made away with her because he was afraid she would squeal on him. As far as we know, there were only three persons at Cedar Cove that night whom the cockatoo knew by name. One of 'em is dead. The other two were Knobbetts and you."

He glanced at his watch. His pudgy face lengthened a little.

"The darned thing has stopped," he announced. "Must have forgotten to wind—"

He paused and gazed down at the dial. "By gosh," he exclaimed.

Jimmie watched him. Something, he knew, had been suggested to Mr. Dakin's mind by the stopping of the timepiece.

"Knobbetts said he thought the timer on the Ford had given out when he was halfway between the village and Cedar Cove," the lawyer mumbled. "Said he walked back to the village and got a new one. But when he got back to the car with it, he couldn't get it to run. Something else was evidently the trouble, so he had to

leave the Ford in the road and walk home. That's how he explained why he was late returning. Nobody has thought of checking up on him."

Slowly and thoughtfully he wound his watch. That finished, he looked absently at Jimmie.

"Between the tramp and Knobbetts," he said, "we may find the murderer."

It appeared, however, that he had been wrong in this forecast. The doctors and the hospitals had no record of a wounded tramp. Inquiries at the garage substantiated that part of Knobbetts' story having to do with the purchase of a new timer for the Ford. The fate of Madam Katoo remained an unsolved mystery. No trace was found of the bullet. Jimmie could tell from Mr. Dakin's looks and manner that things were going badly.

"Our luck will turn," said the lawyer. "Don't worry."

But their luck had not turned when the case of the state versus James Garrett was called. Things had progressed rapidly, for the grand jury had happened to be in session when the crime occurred and the regular term of the district court had opened soon afterward. Mr. Dakin had fought for delay but without success. Jimmie, feeling rather overwhelmed, watched the gradual filling of the jury box and then listened for three and a half days to the presentation of the state's evidence. He heard Knobbetts, one of the prosecution's witnesses, denounce him as a wastrel and a thief. His visit to Cedar Cove and the episode in Mr. Webb's study were emphasized in the most damaging manner. He could see the jury seize eagerly upon the two circumstances of the missing cockatoo and the bullet. These were things that appealed to their imagination.

"They're eating it up," remarked Mr. Dakin during a recess. "It's all circumstantial, of course, but—" He rubbed his long, bright nose and looked down at his notes.

Against his protest, the jurors were taken out to Cedar Cove to visit the scene of the crime and see for themselves how impossible it would have been for the defendant to fire a bullet in such a manner that no trace of it could be found. Mr. Baines, the district attorney, a small man with an astounding pompadour and ferocious eyes, looked well pleased after the expedition.

Jimmie, called to the stand by his attorney, felt a little overawed at first, with the unfriendly eyes of twelve good men and true upon him. His eyes would stray occasionally to exhibit number one, the revolver that had ended his stepfather's life and that was now lying

in plain sight on the table just below the judge's bench. But Mr. Dakin knew how to make him feel at ease. By and by he could look the jurors straight in the eyes as he had been counseled to do. Under the big man's softvoiced questions he related how, in prison, he had brooded over his stepfather's harsh treatment, how resentment and hate had sprung up within him, and how he had looked forward to the day when he could go to Mr. Webb and ease his pent-up rancor by flinging the stolen money in his stepfather's face and pouring red-hot words on his head.

Mr. Dakin questioned him at length upon his mood when he left prison—a foolish mood, but a very human one. He brought out how Jimmie had gone to a friend and borrowed money with which to repay what he had stolen. At the end of the long examination Jimmie felt that much had been gained. The jurors looked less hostile. Even juror number seven, who for a time had listened with an expression of sour incredulity, seemed impressed.

"You may have the witness," said Mr. Dakin to the district attorney.

Like an impatient bull pup suddenly unleashed, Mr. Baines jumped to his feet. His pompadour waggled as he strode menacingly toward the witness. He snatched up exhibit number one and held it close to Jimmie's eyes.

"Garrett, you held this revolver in your hand the night your stepfather was murdered?"

"I did," said Jimmie frankly, having been counseled to speak with candor in matters beyond dispute.

"You threatened him with it?"

"I tried to frighten him."

"You fired a shot from it?"

"That's true."

"Yet you have denied under oath that you shot your stepfather. If you didn't, will you explain to the jury what became of the bullet?"

"I can't."

"You know that the scene of the crime, as well as the ground outside the window, was searched a few hours after the murder?"

"So I have been told."

"And that no bullet was found, or any trace of a bullet?"

"So I understand."

"Well, then—" Mr. Baines ran his fingers through his pompadour and paused briefly for rhetorical effect—"can you explain in any convincing manner how a bullet fired under such circumstances,



and from the position you occupied when you fired it, could disappear completely?"

"No, I can't."

Mr. Baines paused to let the answer sink in, then went on in a gentler tone:

"You know, don't you, Garrett, that the bullet you fired was afterward extracted from Mr. Webb's body?"

Mr. Dakin, a little slow as usual, was on his feet with an objection. It was sustained, but the damage had been done. The district attorney consulted his notes, and then came rapid-fire questions concerning the missing cockatoo. Very deftly he emphasized the point, already implanted in the minds of the jurors, that the only conceivable explanation for the cockatoo's disappearance was to be found in the murderer's fear that she would betray him.

Then Mr. Baines's manner changed; there was a little purr in his voice.

"Garrett, you have told the jury how you went to a friend and borrowed money to pay back what you stole. You knew that your stepfather was fairly well off, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You knew that the theft of a few hundred dollars meant nothing to a man in his position?"

"Yes."

"Then why were you in such a hurry to repay what you had stolen? Couldn't you have waited till you could earn the money and didn't have to borrow it?"

"I wanted to tell Mr. Webb to his face what I thought of him, and I didn't feel I could do it till I had paid him back."

"Oh, so that's it!" Mr. Baines's tone was still gentleness itself. "You wanted to go to him with a clean breast. Was that your only reason?"

"Yes, the only one."

"The only one, Garrett?" His tone and manner conveyed worlds of meaning.

Jimmie felt bewildered. What was the prosecutor driving at? Then, glancing over the jury box, he caught a thin, knowing grin on the face of juror number seven. In a moment Mr. Baines's innuendo was clear. Very subtly he had sought to instill the suggestion in the minds of the jurors that the defendant's real purpose had been to create a favorable impression and an appearance of innocence.

"Positively," said Jimmie, but he knew it sounded flat.

"That's all," said Mr. Baines, waving his hand complacently, and then court adjourned for the day.

The defense fared no better the following day. Mr. Dakin called character witnesses, questioning each at such great length that Jimmie suspected he was merely sparring for time. Things were going badly for Mr. Dakin. Mr. Baines succeeded in discrediting much of the evidence intended to build up a character for a man just out of prison. At one point, during the testimony of the young friend from whom Jimmie had borrowed the money, he sauntered to the exhibits table and absently picked up the sheet of paper on which the dead man had recorded his belief that his stepson was capable of murder. It seemed a very casual act, but the effect was not lost.

"We aren't licked yet," was the most optimistic comment Mr. Dakin had to offer when he saw his client in the iron-grilled enclosure that evening.

He lowered his big head and played with his watchchain.

"The things that worry me most are the cockatoo and the bullet," he grumbled. "It's the kind of stuff that appeals to a jury. Baines has hammered it into their heads so hard they can't see anything else. The bullet and the fool cockatoo are his strongest points."

Jimmie nodded gloomily.

"There isn't much time," said Mr. Dakin. "The case will go to the jury tomorrow afternoon. Hang it all, Jimmie, we've simply got to find that bullet. Or else the cockatoo. Unless we do—"

It was a curious sort of pause. The words merely ceased and hung suspended, as if Mr. Dakin's vocal cords had suddenly snapped. He was gazing toward the window, kinky brows drawn up, his head at a slant, a queer intentness in his sallow face.

"By heck, Jimmie!"

Jimmie followed his gaze, but all he could see was a pigeon with gray and faintly purplish plumage strutting pertly on the window ledge. It was just an ordinary pigeon, yet the lawyer stared at it as if the bird's sleek wings sheltered the answer to all his perplexities.

"Gosh!" he said. "Why didn't I think of that before?"

The bird, as if resenting his rude stare, flapped her wings and soared away.

"What?" Jimmie asked.

"You saw that pigeon, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

The lawyer reached for his hat.

"I've got another hunch, Jimmie. It's a surefire one this time, I think. Good news for you in the morning. So long."

Jimmie stared at him as he bustled out. He smiled faintly. There was something a little ludicrous about Mr. Dakin's excitement.

The atmosphere of the courtroom seemed to have changed overnight when he took his seat beside Mr. Dakin the next morning. The jurors looked as hostile as before, but Mr. Baines seemed very repressed and subdued. Mr. Dakin looked rather worn, also a little shabbier than usual, but there was an air of quiet exaltation about his big frame.

"Baines and I have just had the judge in camera," he whispered.

Jimmie tingled. The lawyer's excitement, though repressed, was infectious. In front of him lay a huge parcel roughly done up in newspaper. Jimmie was curious to know what it contained, but the judge entered just then, and he gave Jimmie a queer look as he took his high seat.

"Knobbetts," called Mr. Dakin.

There was a little stir in the back of the room. Knobbetts, in garments that might have been handed down to him from his late employer, and with a look of faint surprise on his long face, took the witness stand.

"Knobbetts," began Mr. Dakin pleasantly, "I have a few more questions to ask you. You have told the jury that Mr. Webb brought a considerable amount of money with him to Cedar Cove. Exactly how much did he bring?"

"About a thousand dollars, sir. He meant to stay several months, and he wanted to have enough for running expenses. He explained that he didn't wish to open an account in the village because he didn't want people to know where he was."

"I see. So he brought a thousand dollars in cash. With the amount Garrett brought that afternoon, that made nearly eighteen hundred dollars. By the way, Knobbetts, how much did Mr. Webb pay you?"

"Eighty dollars a month."

"And you have been investing every penny of your savings in stocks?"

"Yes, sir," said Knobbetts a little uneasily, casting a quick glance at the parcel lying in front of the lawyer.

"You have always been thrifty, haven't you, Knobbetts? You believe in making every penny count?"

"Well, I think it's a good idea, sir," said Knobbetts virtuously.

"Excellent, Knobbetts. Now, you have testified that you drove to the village about two o'clock on the day of the murder. You had trouble with the car and had to walk part of the way back, so you did not return to Cedar Cove until half-past five or six. Couldn't you be a little more explicit as to the time?"

"No, sir, I don't believe I can. In the excitement of finding Mr. Webb dead I didn't notice the time."

"That's natural enough. Are you sure, though, that Mr. Webb was dead when you returned?"

The witness winced a little at this peculiar question. "Oh, quite sure, sir."

"Tell the jury again what you did when you found Mr. Webb's body."

"I ran to a telephone and notified the village authorities."

"You had to go on foot?"

"Oh yes, the car was out of commission."

"How far did you have to run?"

"About a mile and a half. There was no telephone nearer than that."

"You must have been out of breath. Then you went back to Cedar Cove and waited for the officers. They were slow in arriving, I understand. How long did you have to wait?"

"About half an hour."

"And what did you do?"

"Just waited, sir."

"Did you see anything of the cockatoo?"

"No, sir, but I didn't give her a thought. I was too upset over the murder."

"Of course," Mr. Dakin nodded affably. "What about the tramp? See anything of him?"

"No, I didn't see him either."

"Well, I understand Mr. Webb had given him some money earlier in the day. Probably Cedar Cove couldn't hold him after that. Did you see Jimmie Garrett?"

"No, sir."

"So you were alone in the house for half an hour. Did you stay inside all the time?"

"Yes, sir. It had started to rain quite hard."

"You didn't take a walk to while away the time? There's a queer rock formation about a third of a mile from the house, I understand. It's called Gideon's Pulpit. There's a path winding to it along the

shore, and part of it leads over a surface of reddish clay, making it very slippery in a rain. You didn't happen to walk in that direction?"

A wave of pallor swept Knobbetts' long face. He gripped the arms of the witness stand.

"No," sullenly. "I've told you I didn't walk anywhere."

"Do you always tell the truth, Knobbetts?"

The witness looked at the district attorney as if expecting an objection to such questioning, but none came. Knobbetts gave a shrug for an answer.

"By the way, Knobbetts," said Mr. Dakin softly, "have you ever owned a revolver?"

"A revolver? Never, sir. Not recently, that is. Not in a good many years."

Jimmie, growing more and more excited, looked at Mr. Dakin. The lawyer's round, flabby face was ostentatiously artless.

"Think hard, Knobbetts. Didn't you discover by accident one day that Mr. Webb owned a revolver? Didn't it strike you that a revolver was a good thing to have, and didn't you go and buy one just like Mr. Webb's, thinking it might come in handy someday?"

The witness gave his questioner a long, trembling stare.

"No, sir!" he shouted. "I never—"

"No use getting excited, Knobbetts. Let me see, you have a sister living somewhere, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Knobbetts, fidgeting and moistening his lips. "She lives in Bradford."

Mr. Dakin nodded. "That's about forty miles from here, isn't it? I understand your sister is in poor circumstances. Now and then you have been sending her parcels containing articles you have picked up around Mr. Webb's house—nothing of very great value and nothing that Mr. Webb would be likely to miss. Isn't that so?"

The witness mopped his face with his handkerchief.

"I never took anything without Mr. Webb's permission," he protested.

"Perhaps not. Your sister would sell the articles, and you would go fifty-fifty on the proceeds. Generally you sent them in paper parcels. But the last batch you sent her was in a suitcase. The suitcase was locked, and you forgot to send her the key, so she didn't open it. You didn't intend she should open it, did you?"

Knobbetts' labored breathing could be heard all over the tense courtroom. He twisted his neck and moved his lips, but no words came.

"And so," said Mr. Dakin, "the suitcase wasn't opened until I ran out to Bradford last night and called on your sister. By the way, Knobbetts; you sent the suitcase the day after Mr. Webb was murdered and the same day Garrett was arrested. Isn't that true?"

"No!" cried Knobbetts in a thin, cracked voice. "I see what you're driving at. It isn't true. It's all lies!"

Very calmly Mr. Dakin opened the parcel on the table. He exhibited a revolver. "Recognize it, Knobbetts?"

The witness shuddered convulsively. Mr. Dakin exhibited a pair of rough shoes.

"Recognize them, Knobbetts?" No answer, only a hoarse, inarticulate stutter. "You tried to clean them, but you were in a hurry and didn't do a very good job. There was still bits of caked reddish clay around the heels and in the seams around the soles. You must have taken a walk to Gideon's Pulpit after all. There's no red clay anywhere else in the neighborhood of Cedar Cove. Why did you go there, Knobbetts?"

Still Knobbetts had no answer. He merely twisted in his chair and glared now and then at the lawyer.

"Your Honor," said Mr. Dakin, "I move that the indictment against my client be dismissed. The murderer sits in this chair. Garrett is absolutely innocent. Last night I found the cockatoo and the bullet of which the prosecution has made so much. I found the cockatoo where Knobbetts buried it near Gideon's Pulpit—and the bullet was in the cockatoo."

Mr. Dakin could not resist making a dramatic gesture as he added the last seven words. Jimmie started out of his chair, then sat down again. A buzzing went around the courtroom. There was rapping for order.

"It's not for me to explain what happened," said Mr. Dakin modestly. He looked a little taller and broader as he stood before the bench. "I might offer a theory, though. The cockatoo was in the habit of flying in and out of her cage, sometimes perching in the oak just outside the window. She sat in the oak when Garrett fired the shot. The bullet lodged against her breastbone. Knobbetts was standing outside the window. He saw Garrett give Mr. Webb the money and, a few minutes later, run excitedly from the house. A devil flew into Knobbetts. He has always been greedy. He wanted the eighteen hundred dollars in the desk, and he knew Mr. Webb would not give up the money without a fight. It took him only a minute to go to his room and get his revolver and shoot Mr. Webb

dead. He knew Garrett would be accused of the crime, that all the circumstances would point to Garrett as the murderer. But Knobbetts added one more circumstance when he buried the cockatoo. Garrett, had he been the coldblooded murderer the state has tried to make him out, would have done just that."

His Honor looked at the wretched figure in the witness chair. Then he looked at Jimmie Garrett, a little dazed but with a straight gaze and a fine bearing.

"The court will take the motion under advisement," he announced. "Officer, you will place this witness under arrest. Defendant is released in custody of counsel."

Mr. Dakin placed his great soft paw on Jimmie's shoulder.

"Well, Jimmie, we've won."

"Thanks to you," said Jimmie.

"No." Mr. Dakin's heavy eyes strayed for a moment to the windowsill. "Thanks to the pigeon."

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## SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

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# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**C**aleb Carr's **The Angel of Darkness** reprises the characters introduced in last year's bestselling historical thriller set in late 1890's New York. (I recommend reading *The Alienist*, available in paperback, first.) This case begins with the brazen kidnapping of an infant. Before it's over, readers are treated to chilling insights from one of the earliest practitioners in psychology, plunge into a courtroom battle against none other than Clarence Darrow, and follow Teddy Roosevelt with a hand-picked batch of sailors through the gang-infested streets of lower Manhattan. Carr has switched narrators for his second book and has jumped ahead in time, so it's the former street urchin Stevie who tells the compelling, often harrowing tale of Libby Hatch and the events surrounding the small band's attempts to stop her, all supposedly penned some twenty years later. Carr has carefully assembled a large and memorable cast of characters on a set that screams of authenticity. They play out a chilling drama. (Random House, \$25.95)

Stephanie Barron continues her own historical series starring the eighteenth century author Jane Austen in her third adventure, **Jane and the Wandering Eye** (Bantam, \$22.95). Jane and her parents and sister are now living in the popular British resort town of Bath, a place about which Jane has more than a few pithy comments. When the tedium of "taking the waters" and calling on like-minded folks of quality threatens to drive our dear narrator mad, Lord Harold—known as the Gentleman Rogue—privately requests that Jane keep an eye on his young niece. That leads Jane and kin to a rout, a masquerade ball that proves to be the scene of the crime: the murder of the director of the local repertory company. Barron does an admirable job of telling her tale in the style of the

period, fictionally filling in some of the large gaps in the beloved author's private life in a manner most gratifying to mystery fans.

Edgar winner David Housewright brings back his St. Paul private eye Holland Taylor in the second of this promising series, **Practice to Deceive** (Foul Play, \$22). As a favor to his father, Taylor reluctantly agrees to try to reclaim the life savings of an elderly widow. His first shot across the bow is a visit, accompanied by his attorney girlfriend, to extremely unpleasant investment counselor Levering Field. That has little effect on Field, who was within his legal rights in investing old Mrs. Gustafson's entire wad in a development project that went bust. So Taylor seeks the assistance of a computer genius friend to put pressure of another kind on him, starting a chain reaction that leads to murder—and Taylor is the prime suspect. Housewright's choice of location is fresh, his narrator-protagonist is resourceful and witty, and he's added a few twists and turns to a plot that is solidly paced and peppered with action.

Amanda Cross has a new Kate Fansler novel, always a treat for her longtime fans. **The Puzzled Heart** (Ballantine, \$21) opens with a dire premise: Kate's law-professor husband Reed has been kidnapped. The ransom note demands that she "recant her insane feminist position" if she wishes to protect him from further harm. Now what? She consults Harriet Furst, the strong-minded septuagenarian introduced in *An Imperfect Spy*. Harriet, it seems, is now a partner in a two-woman private eye firm in Manhattan. As Kate battles with anxiety and emotional stress, she also is forced to acknowledge that this crime is very personal. She must review a lifetime: childhood privilege, an early rebellion against her family's values, an illustrious academic career, and a reputation for outspoken feminist views. Her secret enemy has ties of sorts to all four.

Strong and unusual characters add extra dimension to the chilling premise of Lisa Gardner's **The Perfect Husband** (Bantam, \$6.50). Jim Beckett, the title character, is actually the perfect sociopath. He selects his very young and naive bride Tess as carefully as he moves on to choose the ten women he brutally murders. What Tess initially sees is a charming young policeman new to her small town. Two years and a daughter later, she has had the veil removed from her eyes, and with her help, the FBI is finally able to convict Jim Beckett. Beckett vows to return to kill her, and Tess has no reason to doubt him. When he escapes from prison three years later, she intends to fight back. Which takes her to the desert home of an ex-

(continued on page 158)

# THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious by Kristine Harley of Minable mentions go to Tom Hampshire; Holly Parr of Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Alfred ifornia; James Hagerty of er of Tigard, Oregon; D. B. Joan M. Ritz of Augusta, Georgia; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts.



Photograph contest was won neapolis, Minnesota. Honor-Sweeney of Portsmouth, New Longview, Washington; J. F. W. Cross of Sacramento, Cal-Melbourne, Florida; Jim Bak-Hall of Portsmouth, Ohio;

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

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## GO TO PLAN B by Kristine Harley

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Before the robbery I laid the groundwork: I established myself as the Nice Girl. Always drove the speed limit, helped out with Meals on Wheels, took little old ladies in my truck from the nursing home to the shopping mall. Small towns just love citizens like me. So when I pointed my gun at the bank teller and demanded the money, she was too shocked to press the security button.

I walked out of the bank and down the street without a hitch, casually carrying my sack of bills and even waving at Al, a neighbor, who was entering the barber shop.

My van was parked where I left it—apparently I'd gotten a ticket! I laughed as I pulled the useless piece of paper from beneath the windshield wiper and threw my bundle in the back seat. But then, as I heard the distant police siren, the handwriting on the paper stopped me in my tracks:

"Saw you parked in a no-parking zone. Because you've always helped me, I lent you my chain. Can't get towed! When you need to leave, just drop in at the barber's, and I'll unlock you. Al."

(continued from page 156)

Marine intent on drowning his own marital sorrows in booze. But Tess needs what J. T. can teach her: how to protect herself and her daughter. Readers get loads of angst, great procedural stuff, some hair-raising action scenes, and a villain to keep you awake at night. What more can any thriller reader want?

Anne Perry's latest Inspector Monk case, **The Silent Cry** (Fawcett, \$24), begins when the former Scotland Yard detective takes a commission to locate a gang preying on women inhabiting London's poorest district. Prostitutes and factory women have been accosted and raped by three strangers, who depart in hired carriages. Then young, wealthy Rhys Duff is found in one of those dark alleys beaten senseless and mute; nearby lies the fatally battered body of his father. Monk's evidence points to Rhys as one of the gang members; soon his friend Hester Latterly's private patient is standing in the dock accused of patricide. At nurse Hester's request, Rhys is defended by esteemed Sir Oliver Rathbone. Thus, again, this unlikely trio works separately and together to uncover the truth in a murderer's heart. Not until the final pages is the shocking solution revealed, another perfect ending in a solid, entertaining series.

Music lovers—especially of opera—should find much to enjoy in Kate Ross's latest, **The Devil in Music** (Viking, \$24.95), a mystery featuring her early nineteenth century British hero and dandy, Julian Kestrel. Kestrel and his trusty sidekick, a former pickpocket named Dipper, are traveling in Italy at a time when tourism is at a low. Austria is in power; a secret society of rebels called the Carbonari are in evidence in random acts of terrorism and violence. But what does any of this have to do with the murder five years earlier of wealthy opera patron Lodovico Malvezzi in his own gazebo? A tale opulent in Italian period detail and lush with music, with an engaging amateur sleuth and a clever ending to top it all off.

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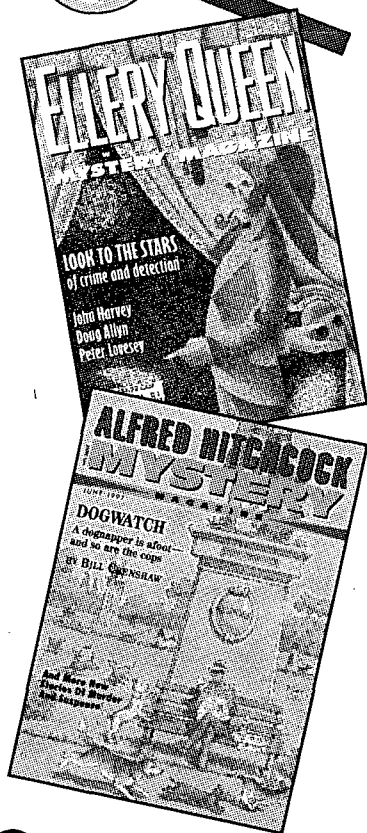
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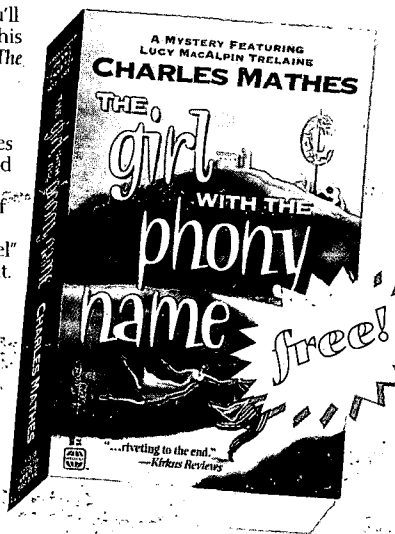
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